

Born to consume

In the first century BC, Quintus Horatius Flaccus commented: "Nos numerus sumus et fruges consumere nati", by which he meant that we are individuals born to consume resources. This is the first mention in history of what we now refer to every day as the consumer society.

Then in the 20th century, again talking of the same phenomenon, the sociologist Ivan Illich (in 'Tools for conviviality', 1973) pointed out a distinction: "In a consumer society there are inevitably two kinds of slaves: the prisoners of addiction and the prisoners of envy."

If we examine our current society we shall have to agree that, on the one hand many of us are slaves to alcohol, tobacco and other drugs without number, while on the other we strive mightily to "keep up with the Joneses". (This last expression is attributed to an American cartoonist, Arthur Momand, who on 1 April 1913 initiated a comic strip of that title in the *New York Globe* which ran for 28 years.)

I was reminded of the great consumer boom in which we struggle by the arrival of a batch of unsolicited catalogues. These encourage me to take advantage of bargains that would make life easier or more interesting both for myself and my friends and relatives to whom I must soon think about sending Christmas gifts. Most of the gadgets offered, despite their ingenuity, fail to convince me that they really fulfil a need or are likely to contribute to human contentment. Indeed, they serve the narrow interest of some commercial enterprise, more often than not, and therefore leave me cold.

Not least, there is a class of offers that irritate me professionally, since many of the articles involved now appear on the shelves of pharmacies, in the shape of cosmetic and hygiene aids, or as dietary supplements claimed to promote healthy living. The medical and scientific journals of late have tended to be dismissive of widely accepted claims that certain vitamin and mineral supplements, and certain alternative and complementary natural products, offer a primrose path towards more fulfilled individual living. Indeed, there have been warnings that such solutions may sometimes carry a risk that outweighs benefit.

Meanwhile, the politically and economically inspired call towards more and more consumption by our human societies of the goods and services which our planet offers vastly overshadows the warnings which cautious philosophers and ecologists issue to people suffering tunnel vision. The material assets of the world have their limits, and the energy we use to make them available to us is subject to the concept of entropy embodied in the second law of thermodynamics, over which we have no control whatever. What we should do is think about what are the basic necessities for the human family and limit our demands

to them plus a moderate allowance for luxury, not an immoderate one.

And when it comes to encouraging consumer practice for commercial purposes, we do well to recollect what Dorothy Sayers wrote (in 'Creed or chaos', 1947): "A society in which consumption has to be artificially stimulated in order to keep production going is a society founded on trash and waste, and such a society is a house built on sand."

Making children violent

Some students of the social problem of violence have argued that watching television programmes is likely to encourage violent behaviour during adolescence and adulthood. Some investigations have suggested that, in the United States at least, neither the amount of television watched nor its content makes much difference to play behaviour, reading habits, social interactions or communal aggressiveness. In contrast, a study of three similar communities in Canada, which differed in their degree of television saturation, showed drastic effects on reading skills and social behaviour.

A discussion of the various papers published on this subject, in *Science* for 5 July, points out that although the quantity and quality of programmes viewed at a tender age may show association with violence in later life, no evidence of causation has been produced. Nevertheless, extensive viewing of scenes of violence may contribute to the development of an aggressive disposition, conduct disorder, and some types of personality disorder, particularly in youths who have a history of maltreatment in childhood, defective parenting and other childhood adversities. Those at risk may show a vicious spiral in which a predisposition to violence is fuelled by scenes experienced during viewing. Both environmental and genetic factors may be involved.

The overall consensus seems to be that, as the American Medical Association and five other major health organisations have put it, "... the data point overwhelmingly to a causal connection between media violence and aggressive behaviour in some children". Physical aggression, including bullying during childhood and adolescence, abuse, domestic violence, street fighting and violent crime, is a major problem throughout the entire world. It seems likely that, among other measures, a reduction in television viewing might result in significant reductions in the pattern of violent behaviour, as well as an improvement in the reading capacity of children and adults alike.

Saint of the knives

On 24 August is celebrated the anniversary of St Bartholomew, whose symbol is a knife. Bartholomew is reputed to have been flayed alive in the year 44, hence his connection with knives. A custom was established at Croyland Abbey, when on the saint's anniversary all comers were presented with small knives. Later, in 1133, Bartholomew Fair was founded and celebrated each 24 August at Smithfield market in London, continuing for three days originally, until 1752. Although moves were afoot in 1711 to extend the fair from three to 14 days, they were not successful. This was a national fair, comprising many different amusements and entertainments, and even the objections of Puritans failed to suppress it in the 17th century. When the calendar was reformed in 1752, however, its date was altered to 3 September. Its last celebration was in 1855, after the site of the fair was transferred to Islington in 1840.



One of the worst celebrations in history occurred on 24 August in 1572, when a massacre of the Huguenots, inspired by Catherine de Médicis, mother of Charles IX of France, commenced in Paris and neighbouring provinces, with the slaughter of some 3,000 inhabitants of Paris alone.

To us, Saint Bartholomew is celebrated for the foundation in 1123 of one of our famous London hospitals, Barts, by the Augustinian friar Rahere, to be run by a master, eight brethren and four Augustinian sisters. When it was reformed after the Tudor dissolution of such establishments, in 1549, three surgeons were appointed, with one physician later in 1560. This establishment was increased to four physicians and four surgeons, with a matron and 12 sisters caring for 100 patients, until 1895.

One of the famous names attached to the hospital is that of William Harvey, who was appointed physician there in 1609. Barts is also celebrated for producing its own pharmacopoeia as early as 1730.