From the 1950s through the 1970s, there were two schools that were known for their strong support of markets and opposition to regulation. These schools were the University of Chicago and the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA). Milton Friedman and George Stigler were at the University of Chicago, Armen Alchian and Jack Hirshleifer were at UCLA. In this satirical piece Hirshleifer responds to critics of the market economy who argue that it creates false wants and then fulfills them by extending the argument to many more goods. (One such critic was John Kenneth Galbraith in “The Dependence Effect,” earlier in this book.) The point at issue is, of course, where to draw the line.

Regulation of wants is a slippery slope, and Hirshleifer and other libertarians believe that once society starts down that slope, it will go much further than makes sense.

In the article, “SS” is a reference to the secret police of Adolf Hitler’s dictatorship in Nazi Germany.


The Sumptuary Manifesto

Consumption . . . is a seamless web. If we ask about the chromium, we must ask about the cars. The questions that are asked about one part can be asked about all parts. The automobiles are too heavy, and they use irreplaceable lead? One can ask with equal cogency if we need to make all the automobiles that we now turn out . . .

As with automobiles, so with everything else. In an opulent society the marginal urgency of all kinds of goods is low. It is easy to bring our doubts and questions to bear on the automobiles. But the case is not different for (say) that part of our food production which contributes not to nutrition but to obesity, that part of our tobacco which contributes not to comfort but to carcinoma and that part of our clothing which is designed not to cover nakedness but to suggest it . . .

It is also suggested that uninhibited consumption has something to do with individual liberty. If we begin interfering with consumption, we shall be abridging a basic freedom.

I shan’t dwell long on this. That we make such points is part of the desolate modern tendency to turn the discussion of all questions, however simple and forthright, into a search for the violation of some arcane principle, or to evade and suffocate common sense by verbose, incoherent, and irrelevant moralizing. Freedom is not much concerned with tail fins or even with automobiles. Those who argue that it is identified with the greatest possible range of choice of consumers’ goods are only confessing their exceedingly simple-minded and mechanical view of man and his liberties.

Our Peerless Leader

Accordingly, and with a view to liberating mankind from their insane preoccupation with material comforts of low marginal urgency, the SUMPTUARY SOCIETY (SS) has been formed to DEMAND that this nation immediately and without exception declare it to be a CAPITAL OFFENSE to:

1. Live in a dwelling unit of more than 400 square feet.
2. Own an automobile with wheelbase over 72 inches.
3. Drive an automobile using gasoline of higher octane rating (and lead content) than standard fuel of the year 1923.
4. Drink whiskey aged more than 60 days.
5. Smoke more than ten cigarettes in one day.
6. Possess clothing in excess of, if a male, 1 coat, 2 pairs of shoes, 2 pairs of socks, 2 suits, 4 shirts, 3 handkerchiefs, 1 tie, 1 hat, 1 pair of rubbers, and 1 change of underwear. If a female, the same rules will apply with appropriate modifications (for example, jackets will button on the left instead of the right).
7. Appear in public clean-shaven (if a male).

Furthermore, it will be declared an exceptionally HEINOUS offense punishable by boiling in oil to:

1. Possess more than two of the following: eye-level kitchen range, refrigerator with across-the-top freezing compartment, combination washer-dryer, two-tone auto paint job, Waring blender, chafing dish, or double-ended egg cup.
2. Be detected reading [George] Orwell’s 1984, a book known to have low marginal usefulness, and whose production consumes irreplaceable timber, ink, glue, and lead type.

The following remarks are directed to sympathetic citizens who may not have fully grasped the logic underlying the reconstruction of our greedy wasteful society on sumptuary principles.

The most crucial point to appreciate is that the principles of the SS must be distinguished from a bleak Puritanism which would leave life joyless and empty. Under the false Puritan ideal, the individual was to be restrained from pursuit of the illusory goal of material pleasure by self-discipline. With our deeper knowledge today, of course, we are aware that the internal conflicts thus set up are psychologically damaging. The principles of the SS, in contrast, are to be enforced by a psychologically sound and healthy method, the method of (in the words of our PEERLESS LEADER) social responsibility. That is to say, through detectives, policemen, judges, and wardens. Furthermore, any residue of frustrations suffered by unreconstructed individuals will be more than compensated by the wholesome (and non-material-consuming) glee in their work which society’s guardians may be expected to take.

The second point to realize is that our PEERLESS LEADER has declared certain forms of consumption to be innocuous or even praiseworthy: education, health, good government, clean countryside, and orchestras are specifically commended as having “rather small materials requirements.” Of course, under sumptuary principles unaccompanied vocalists are even superior to orchestras, while among orchestras those employing expensive material-consuming mechanical aids like the piano, violin, and French horn should probably be eschewed in favor of those relying on simple instruments like the harmonica, ocarina, and kazoo. We may similarly reason that clean surroundings are best achieved by a man with bag and pointed stick; the tendency toward mechanization of garbage-handling is to be deplored, however creditable the object.

The modern sumptuary philosophy is an outgrowth—the culmination and crowning achievement—of twentieth-century economic science. We place particular importance, therefore, upon matters of economic policy, especially when these are regarded (in the words of our PEERLESS LEADER) as “instruments of social control.” Our program includes the following DEMANDS:

1. Farm price supports at 200 per cent of parity. Our PEERLESS LEADER (also known as the FEARLESS FRIEND OF THE FARM BLOC) himself refuted those who would have reduced price support from 90 per cent of parity, showing the enormous contribution these support payments have made to agricultural progress and technological innovation. Still more progress could be anticipated with prices at 200 per cent of parity. This
arrangement has the unique sumptuary advantage that improvements of production
techniques do not lead to any increase in consumption. Furthermore, the unconsumed
produce may be used as fertilizer to restore or even increase the quality of the soil—a vital
component of our “resource base” for the future.

2. Price ceilings on everything not price-supported. To allow markets to go uncontrolled
would be to “ascribe a magical automatism” to the price system.

3. A food excise tax proportioned to calorie content; personal taxes based on avoirdupois or
volume displacement. The anti-corpulence program of the SS is based, of course, upon
the concern of our PEERLESS LEADER with the problem of obesity. Our slogan: Fine
the fat, stick the stout, and plunder the plump.

4. A yardage tax on clothing materials.

5. A universal protective—nay, prohibitive—tariff. For, if it is wrong for us to overconsume
our own irreplaceable materials, how much worse to use our economic power to rob
poorer nations of their limited heritage.

No thinking man today will be swayed by the FAKE FREEDOM ISSUE raised by our enemies,
the so-called libertarians or voluntarists. To paraphrase our PEERLESS LEADER, true
consumer’s freedom gives no one license to buy autos with tail fins—anymore than true freedom
of speech gives any misguided person a “right” to propagandize against the views of the SS.