

Frugality? Or Critical Thinking?

When I was four or five my father came home from work and slumped on the couch. He remained there brooding for hours. My mother explained that he had lost his job. My immediate solution was to write up cheque after cheque. Personality traits in combination with this stark memory have made me frugal, except when my wife convinces me to be otherwise. In general though, I am tremendously at odds with our consumer society. Like a quiet minority I find it non-ecological. It is also a great contradiction that while money is spent lavishly by individuals and institutions, our governments then turn around and scrounge to maintain essential services like health and education. Venture companies with sound environmental ideas often go bankrupt. Underfunded schools turn their children into money peddlers. And in the underprivileged world, millions do not have access to safe drinking water and live in shantytowns.

Meanwhile in 1999, General Motors spent \$2.9 billion U.S. on advertising. McDonald's spent \$354 million. (source: *Competitive Media Reporting and Publishers Information Bureau*). Through propaganda, artificial needs for questionable products are maintained at high levels. It is the biggest myth of our age that such behaviour is essential for fueling the economy. Rebuilding feeble overpasses, filtering CO₂, selling environmentally friendly automobiles and water-heating rooftops and buying sophisticated medical equipment stimulate cash flow and resonate across economic sectors as well as anything else.

Here is a short list of highly questionable products and services that take good money out of our pockets, money that could otherwise be spent on shaping a better world.

- (1) **A Second Car.** For most people it seems to be a necessity, but only because they chose a home so far away from both work places. If at least one partner worked nearby, a bicycle or plain old foot-power could be used. Cars add greenhouse gases and, in spite of catalytic converters, nitrous oxides to the atmosphere. They cause green spaces to be converted to parking lots, which in turn lead to excess heating of cities and in coastal areas, to water pollution as well from runoff of dog excrement and other garbage. Two to three-car families also short-fund public transit systems, and in this vicious cycle, people lose faith in buses and turn increasingly to cars, as has occurred in Montreal between 1990 and 2006.
- (2) **Toothpaste.** Most toothpastes contain a scary list of ingredients including sweeteners and strong preservatives. They also include abrasive substances like chalk, which scratch teeth. We would be better off brushing with plain water or perhaps a little baking soda.
- (3) **Stainless Steel Appliances** When was the last time you saw a fridge door rust within a home? Why then are people paying a premium on such nonsense? Luckily, my wife agrees with me on that one, and our new fridge is economical, quiet and black.

(4) Air Conditioners in Cold Climates In Montreal, heat waves last 3 to 4 days, and if we are lucky we have more than two per year. And yet an increasing number of households are getting air-conditioning. This places a great deal of stress on power grids, and unless someone is a senior citizen living in poorly ventilated home, it is not exactly a necessity. Our vehicle came with air conditioning, and we use it very sparingly: it wastes fuel and makes the heat more unbearable when you step out doors. My wife and I also lived for a year in Honolulu where the average temperature is 88° F. Central air conditioning was included with the rent, but after the first few weeks, we turned it off.

(5) Bottled Water from <http://www.nrdc.org/water/drinking/nbw.asp> :

Sales of bottled water in this country have exploded in recent years, largely as a result of a public perception of purity driven by advertisements and packaging labels featuring pristine glaciers and crystal-clear mountain springs. But bottled water sold in the United States is not necessarily cleaner or safer than most tap water, according to a four-year scientific study recently made public by NRDC.

NRDC's study included testing of more than 1,000 bottles of 103 brands of bottled water. While most of the tested waters were found to be of high quality, some brands were contaminated: about one-third of the waters tested contained levels of contamination -- including synthetic organic chemicals, bacteria, and arsenic -- in at least one sample that exceeded allowable limits under either state or bottled water industry standards or guidelines.

In the early 1970's *Mad Magazine* joked about how some day we would have our water delivered along with our milk in the morning. Assuring that every citizen has access to clean drinking water is definitely a responsibility in the realm of governmental affairs. We already pay taxes to ensure that proper treatment and testing materializes. To pay for bottled water translates into placing your trust in less competent people. Notice that most labels on bottled water don't seem to acknowledge the difference between ions and uncharged atoms! The NRDC bottle also revealed that 25% of bottled water is just tap water.

It is amazing that people love the "presentation" and flair of a *Perrier*. And these same people then wonder why Western culture is sometimes scorned. The roots of our culture are based on lofty principles, but bottled water sold under false pretenses is an example of our culture's greed and gullibility.

(6) Private Schools Speaking of gullibility, it is amazing how people assume that because they are paying for something, it will automatically be superior to something that is supposedly free. What's wrong with this sort of reasoning is that public education is not free. It is supported by our tax dollars. When a parent is opting for their kids' private education, they are paying above and beyond for what they are already contributing to provincial governments.

Do most private schools have higher hiring standards? No. Some do have enriched programs, but then the same is true of some public schools. And just like public

schools, many are guilty of inflating marks, which is a sneaky way of pretending that many students are achieving success and keeping the paying customers satisfied.