

## Is shopping all bad?

### Is shopping all bad?

[Mica Nava](#) [1] and [Neal Lawson](#) [2] 10 January 2010

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*When we shop are we exercising our freedom? Or are we more like prisoners exercising in the yard under supervision? Is the consumer market a realm of democracy, or of oligarchy that subordinates us to it - even as it researches our desires which themselves are the often the projection of ever more advanced marketing techniques? Neal Lawson of Compass launched an assault on the way we shop last year in a Penguin you can see here (but you still have to buy it): [All Consuming](#) [8]. A critical review was published [in Chartist by Mica Nava](#) [9] in November to which Neal [has replied](#) [10]. It's great to see an exchange about consumerism and citizenship - and here it is.*

### Mica Nava: Shopping's not all bad

Neal Lawson, political commentator, journalist and chair of the democratic left pressure group Compass, one of the remaining hopes of a demoralised Labour left, has written a polemical and accessible book about the neglected but pressing issue of contemporary consumption. This should be good news. But *All Consuming*, although packed with information and ideas, is uneven with much of it rooted in a now discredited critical framework. The main political agenda -- against waste and for more controls -- is urgent and worthwhile but is too often couched in sensationalist and unsupported claims. The most innovative policy-oriented sections come in the final chapter but I doubt whether many readers will stay the course.

The manuscript was finished in March 2009 so inevitably the cataclysmic events of the 2008-2009 economic crisis, with its predictions of austerity levels not seen since WW2, framed the development of the argument. According to Lawson 'we live not just in a consumer society but in a turbo-consuming society', in a culture of excess which has developed in the UK over the last three

decades as a result of Thatcherite-Hayekian free-market economic policies. These, combined with our 'natural' inclination to uncontrolled consumption, are to blame for the current crisis (which in fact now seems less grave than predicted). Perhaps unsurprisingly, given his political affiliations, the contribution of the Labour Party to the current state of affairs is downplayed.

Social and economic inequalities in neoliberal (not a term Lawson uses) Britain have certainly fuelled ordinary people's desire to own homes and buy things and have developed in tandem with unsustainable and unprecedented lending by the banks. Their coincidence with the escalating dangers of climate change has resulted in a desperately serious situation. But these issues tend to get overshadowed by a moralistic demonisation of what he sees as the instinctual greed, status anxiety, hedonism and vacuity of consumers and their facile manipulation by advertisers 'who exploit our deepest emotional needs and fears'. 'Shopping has been emotionally, culturally and socially grafted onto us' he argues. We are its victims. It has become an 'addiction' without which we can no longer function but which will never satisfy us. 'Turbo-consumerism is the heroin of human happiness'.

Although this 'habit' is the main target, Lawson includes in his attack not only the predictable 'shopping frenzy' and designer handbags but also, inter alia, ostentatious funerals, childhood obesity, the reduction of NHS dentists and the growth of internet dating sites. Just about everything he doesn't like in today's culture is attributed to turbo-consuming. According to him people are depoliticised by their engagement with the market. Their primary identity is as consumers. They find their souls in their possessions.

Does all this sound familiar? The answer is yes. There is paradoxical disjuncture in the book between on the one hand Lawson's claim that turbo-consuming is a new formation specific to Hayekian-Thatcherite free-market economics of the last thirty years and on the other his extensive appropriation of the pessimistic rhetoric of the Frankfurt School and other theorists who wrote about Europe in the 1930s (eg Adorno, Horkheimer, Bernays) and the US in the 1950s and 60s (eg Marcuse, Packard, Friedan) and whose broad argument was that consumption contributes to political acquiescence. The innovative critical work of the last decades by anthropologists, sociologists, feminists, historians and cultural theorists seems largely to have passed him by.

There are exceptions: the book is dedicated to Zygmunt Bauman. But Bauman's analysis is more nuanced than Lawson's; like others in the field Bauman understands that the impulse to shop is part of a broader need in modern mobile societies to be recognised, to be visible, to belong. So this expands the population who consume to include most of us, not only the mindless and mainly female young as Lawson implies, but also teachers, doctors, political activists, writers. We all need to be acknowledged. Some of us are fortunate enough to find ways that provide more social esteem than shopping. Or we buy things like books or paintings that are less trivial than handbags. But everyday shopping and the circulation of goods also needs to be analysed more sensitively. Furnishing homes and the adornment of the self provide enduring pleasures and are not just about being as good as or better than our neighbours. Daniel Miller has written about the cultural meanings of material culture and the way in which shopping and the exchange of gifts can be a major form of kindness and social connectivity within communities and across generations.

Lawson also does not acknowledge recent work on advertising. His bleak views have their roots in 1950s US cold-war theories about manipulation and indoctrination. But not even the advertisers believe that stuff. They know that 80 or 90 percent of products fail despite advertising and that most people are deeply resistant to the thousands of advertising messages they encounter each day. Lawson does not advance his argument by drawing on this outdated work.

His grip on history leaves a lot to be desired as well. The insights in the section (pp 53-60) about the longer history of consumption are unfortunately not sustained in the rest of the book. The dominant tendency is to overlook historical continuities and precedent. Yet the consumption Lawson describes is not as new as he claims. It's true that more people are consuming now but literature and history have long been full of narratives about conspicuous consumption and the importance of status derived from birth, possessions and appearance. Women had a lot to do with the strategies which determined social boundaries by these means. Looking good was a source of social power which enabled some people to improve their lives. Why should this be sneered at? What makes

consumption by the young and poor more reprehensible than consumption by the middle and upper classes? Like the writers of the Frankfurt School, Lawson's argument is often elitist, and similarly, his disdain for this aspect of modern economic and social life implicitly disparages those most involved, usually women.

The book is suffused with nostalgia for a moment before turbo-consuming when people like Lawson's grandparents made-do and mended. But Lawson seems unaware that most of the unregistered labour of those times was carried out by women. Washing machines and disposable nappies were luxuries in the 1960s and most mothers washed nappies by hand, which, like patching clothes, took a good chunk of the day. The increase in women's participation in the labour market from the 1970s may indeed be a contributing factor to the growth of shopping but we should not assume that this makes them more easily duped, addictive, competitive or slothful. Shopping is often just a different way of providing and is generally more fun than being stuck at home. And although make-do-and-mend skills may be unknown to the young, they can do things those of us who know how to darn can't do, like make websites for instance.

It's not only that Lawson overlooks relevant academic work on consumption. He also fails to credit (until the last chapter) the longer history of political and ethical opposition to unregulated consumption. In his introduction he posits a binary either-consumption-or-citizenship model: 'The more we consume the less space there is to be ... citizens in command of our social, political, economic and natural environment.' Yet selective buying and boycotts based on political, ethical and green criteria, recycling networks, charity shops and consumer associations have all been means of curtailing the power of big business and exercising a political voice in the market place. And they have existed for longer than Lawson seems to realise -- consumer co-ops go back to the early nineteenth century. Moreover the enfranchisement of consumers to make political choices when they shop -- or don't shop -- has often been exercised by those who are relatively powerless in other ways. Greens have made their biggest inroads in this fashion. As long as twenty years ago an estimated 50 percent of shoppers operated product boycotts or selective buying to protect the environment. People have been and continue to be citizen consumers, albeit not yet in sufficient numbers.

It is true that exclusion from the market has in the case of the recent banking crisis led to unsustainable borrowing but exclusion can also be, and has been in the past, an incitement to mobilise politically. This was the case with African-Americans excluded from the front of buses and Woolworths lunch counters in 1950s. It was also a major factor in the overthrow of communism in the former Soviet Block

Waste is a tremendously important issue and Lawson quite rightly makes it a significant part of his critical gaze. But again the case is overstated. In recent years there have been loads of attempts by individuals, local authorities and shops themselves to cut down on packaging and to boost recycling. The congestion charge, diesel fuels and huge increases in the numbers of cyclists are all intended to reduce carbon emissions. These efforts may not be enough but consciousness has shifted. This is not acknowledged sufficiently in the book.

I am all for most of the alternatives that Lawson sets out in his final chapter about the taxing of luxury goods, rationing, improving work conditions and imposing restrictions on airport building and advertising. These policy proposals reflect his position in *Compass* and are mainly directed at political parties. But, although worth debating they also highlight a central ambiguity in the book about its political agenda and intended readership. Is Lawson addressing ordinary punters (shucks! one more thing to buy) or people who are already politically engaged? Unfortunately I doubt whether the relentlessly bleak and patronising tone of the first chapters is going to do very much to persuade people to improve their consuming behaviour or recruit them to *Compass* activities.

Why blame consumers or even advertisers for the excesses of capitalism? The Labour Government could have done a lot more to regulate the banks, tax the rich and reduce inequalities in its time in office. Other European states have done this. But the UK, like the US, has not had the courage. Global warming may in part be a consequence of over consumption but there are many other causes

which have little to do with young people's brand preferences. Waste is certainly a problem but is increasingly being dealt with not only by local authorities but by consumer initiatives like Freecycle. Even department stores now stock 'vintage' second-hand clothing.

For Lawson, consumerism is at the heart of our social and environmental problems and, what's more, is not reconcilable with 'kindness, playfulness, generosity and friendship'. But that is patently not so. The truth that the left must acknowledge, however grudgingly, is that consumer societies, even turbo-consumer societies, are not bad places to live, even for the poor. There have been worse regimes in the twentieth century: the middle decades saw the death and displacement of 150 million in Europe alone. Violence and starvation are still endemic in much of the world. Women are not badly off here. People risk their lives to become part of consumer democracies like Britain -- despite the problems. Much could be improved and much is indeed shocking and ridiculous, but consumer culture is not wholly bad. This book has done for me exactly what it was not intended to do: it has reminded me of that.

## Neal Lawson: Shopping is part of the problem

I am indebted to Mica Nava for taking the time to read and provide such a detailed review of my book. I don't know Mica but I guess that because she is writing for Chartist and because of the list of publications to her name she considers herself to be on the left. If that is an accurate guess she wants broadly what I want; a more equal, democratic and sustainable world. But it looks like we differ on how to get there. In particular we differ on what barriers stand in our way. I see the roadblock for the left as the grip of consumerism on our culture and therefore our society and economy. I don't think Mica has the same worry. Let's see if we can explore that difference?

But before we do let me say that I found some of Mica's review helpful. In particular she is right to say that my binary divide between our lives as consumers and citizens and therefore the market and society is more complex than I allow. In my defence I'd argue that it is a polemical book, but we can be political when we shop. And to be fair I do talk a lot about ethical consumption; I just worry that it's still all about shopping, still about more and still about buying a better identity than others. She is right though that I have to be more nuanced.

Mica also says I don't engage with the Labour Party enough - and that too is true. But it was a conscious decision. I critique New Labour all day everyday and get bored the sound of my own voice. I wanted a book that went beyond the usual tight circle and I'm glad she found it accessible. It's why I didn't use terms like neo-liberalism because it puts people off. But if you want a critique of New Labour and consumerism here it is; it inverted the most important principle of social democracy, which is to make the market the servant of society. New Labourites turned this principle on its head as they caved in morally, economically and politically to the neo-liberal hegemony.

Instead of showing there is something more than the market place they injected the corrosive values of competition and consumerism into what was left of the public realm and elevated the like of Tesco's Terry Leahy to gurus of the public sector. Indeed, they left so much space in the aisles of politics that David Cameron could walk in and talk about the morality of selling sexualised underwear to young girls. Presumably to New Labour this was just economic efficiency? But in the book I wanted to take a different, less directly political, approach.

Like other critical reviews of the book, those mostly from the right, Mica accuses me of being moralistic and elitist. I readily accept the former but not the latter. Politics has to be about morality; about competing visions of the good society - or it is nothing. Rather it is about the domination of the morality that has the upper hand at that moment with all that means the distribution of wealth and power. I believe that left values, left morals of society, solidarity and equity are better than right morals of independence, acquisition and charity.

But I refute any charges of elitism. The research for the book and the conversations and talks since have been revealing. People get very defensive when it comes to shopping. They are not duped though others might be; they do not follow any fashion while others do; they shop but don't like it. Yer right! I don't say some (middle class and educated) purchases are good and others bad. I think most are now about symbolism not survival and are therefore open to investigation. Mica says that paintings and books are less trivial than handbags. I don't agree. At least one unquestionably provides a practical function - the others could just be about showing off. It's not about the justification of one piece of consumption over another; it is about understanding identity formation no matter what it is we are buying.

I laugh at myself throughout the book about what I buy and there is much to laugh at. I build an identity through what I buy. The book is an attempt to try and understand why; not to blame false consciousness but to really understand why and how our hopes and fears, needs and desires are bent in a way that creates a turbo-consuming society where we all buy minutely differentiated but essentially the same products, increasingly globalised brands on clone high streets when the world could surely be culturally so much richer and interesting? Why are we willing participants in the impoverishment of our lives and our planet and how do we fight back against a system of social reproduction based on seduction - indeed why would you even bother?

Mica sees a world that is broadly okay as long as we get rid of some of the shopping excesses. I see a world of donkeys following carrots on an endless treadmill of wants turned into needs; not because we are stupid but because it provides enough compensation 'for the real thing' to keep us going and because we have stopped imagining a better alternative. For me everything for the future of the left rests on the rediscovery of 'the real thing' and how that can be more creative, empowering and yes fun than turbo-consumption?

Running through Mica's review is the idea that my book, because it is an attack on turbo consumption, is an attack on women as they are deemed to shop the most. She conflates the two. But I make no gender distinction because I don't believe there are now any real differences between men and women; we are all targets to be sold to. Indeed the figures show that men spend more than women.

Mica, I fear, offers a politics of retreat and refuge that will end in utter defeat for the left. Of course in a consumer society there are sites of resistance. People use shopping playfully and to subvert and I don't decry any of that. But the monster still grows. Of course we want recognition and acknowledgement but why is consumption the dominant prism for this and what are the consequences? Aren't there better ways of being fully human? We don't just have to shop better and less - we have to shift the dominant consumer culture of our society. Because all the time the juggernaut moves on colonising more public spaces and commodifying more dreams. And all the time the poor get poorer and the planet burns. I want better balanced lives and a properly functioning society but the problem is that the market doesn't do balance, it's a machine that just does remorseless profit maximisation, which means selling us more and more. This is why I suggest that we are creeping towards an analysis of consumer society as a proto form of totalitarianism because it is systematically about the abolition of other ways of being. It can be nothing else unless we control it.

But isn't this just middle class post-material angst? Why should the poor be denied the pleasures we have? Indeed Mica says that consumer societies 'are not bad places to live, even for the poor'. I disagree. Of course in absolute terms the poor are better off today but this misses the point. Relatively and emotionally the poor today face awful lives. The poor of the past at least had the bonds of solidarity, the knowledge that the economy or the army would need them at some stage and the hope that a better world was possible.

Today's poor are the failed consumers. They face the hurt, the shame and the humiliation of their isolated exclusion from 'normality'. They have the trappings of normality dangled before them on billboards, on TV and in shop windows but don't have the means to buy them. They have no one to blame for their plight but themselves and no one to hate or over throw just celebrities to admire. They have nothing to hope for. It leads to lives of chronic stress, endless pressure and early graves.



But it's even worse. The poor do have one critical role to play in society today. They are used as a tool of social conditioning. Their plight is the image that is used to keep us on the exhausting treadmill of consumer society. If we stop shopping, stop being normal then we will end up like them; the Others, sub-normal and sub-human. They become figures to despise.

Mica says that everything I don't like in today's culture is attributed to turbo-consumerism and she is just about right. I think it is the glue that holds modern capitalist society together, the deal for a life of hopeless individualism, the pay off for rising insecurity and personalised risk, the compensation for lives that are beyond our control. We are paradoxically its victims and its perpetrators. All Consuming is probably a stupidly over ambitious book in its attempt to understand this society and to point us in the direction of a very different kind of world, a world in which we collectively self-manage our existence - but I couldn't see the point of writing any other book when all the mainstream parties look to continue the consumer consensus. No one dies wishing they had bought more stuff, so why live lives as if that were the case.

**Country or region:** UK

**Topics:** Culture

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 About the authors

Neal Lawson is Chair of the pressure group Compass and has written many pamphlets for the organisation on the themes of democracy and equality. He was author in 2009 of [All Consuming](#) [12] (Penguin) and was co-editor in 2001 of the *Progressive Century*. He serves on the Boards of UK Feminista and the AV Referendum Campaign. He is a Contributing Managing Editor of the quarterly journal *Renewal* and writes for the *Guardian* and the *New Statesman*. He appears regularly on radio and TV. He was previously a trade union researcher, an adviser to Gordon Brown, and a communications consultant.



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