

**Consumed: How markets corrupt
children, infantilize adults, and
swallow citizens whole**

Benjamin R. Barber

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Benjamin R. Barber, a political scientist, has dealt with media-related topics in previous work. His prescient, pre-9/11 book *Jihad vs. McWorld* (1995) explored the polarizing forces of religious/ethnic extremism and global capitalism, with the latter involving U.S. media's globalized distribution, such as Hollywood's domination of world cinema. Illustrating his connection to our field, Barber was a keynote speaker for the International Communication Association in 1996.

Western mass media also play key roles in *Consumed*. Barber argues that the consumption orientation of modern capitalism—manifested in many ways, but key among them being advertising and entertainment-oriented media—creates an “infantilizing ethos” that not only heavily targets children with often adult-themed products but also treats adults as childish beings. The narrowing of differences between children and adults in modern culture is not a new argument; Meyrowitz (1985) in *No Sense of Place* argued that in modern culture, children are becoming more adult like and adults are becoming child like. However, although Meyrowitz focused, from a McLuhan-esque perspective, on television as a technological medium, Barber squarely blames capitalism—or at least the modern, consumption-based version that he argues is a distortion of capitalism. Also, unlike Meyrowitz, he is unequivocally critical of this trend, arguing that it undermines democratic citizenship, creates false and silly needs, and from a global perspective exploits the impoverished while distracting the economically empowered.

The book begins with an overview chapter that lists many different examples of infantilizing culture, including the popularity and marketing force of “comic book” movies like the *Spider-Man* and *Batman* franchises. The book also takes a historical perspective by explaining how an infantilizing ethos replaced the Weberian Protestant Work Ethic of early capitalism. In one chapter, Barber operationalizes what he believes to be the characteristics of an infantilizing consumer

culture, such as ease, simplicity, and speed. Given such characteristics, Barber argues that the vibrancy of the public sphere is eroded, as complex political issues are branded in sound-bite forms, and the consumer citizen is enculturated toward instant gratification and therefore becomes impatient with long-term solutions. Later chapters explore the role of privatization, branding, and techniques of totalization (such as the ubiquitous nature of mass marketing) in modern consumer culture. The last section of the book examines forms of resistance to an infantilizing culture. These forms include localization/hybridization (adding local flavor/values to global templates, such as the playing of local artists on regional MTV channels); the parodic and “carnavalesque”—and thus potentially subversive—nature of some elements of commercial culture; and culture jamming, a form of protest exemplified by the anticommercial group Adbusters and their initiatives like Buy Nothing Day. Seeing many drawbacks to such conventional or visible forms of resistance, Barber also cautiously advocates for new forms of global citizenship.

As an extremely well written tour de force with plenty of examples, *Consumed* clearly is designed to communicate to nonacademics the expansive nature of consumer capitalism and the antidemocratic effects such expansion triggers. But there are some perhaps necessary evils of the trade press version of the argument, and the author's previous *Jihad vs. McWorld* has set the bar high for the communication of critically provocative ideas about our media culture through mass-distributed books. *Consumed* is occasionally a bit repetitive, with many of the same points and same examples used more than once. The book makes a point of keeping critical theory at a rhetorical distance, although the analysis is not antithetical to it. The author reminds readers many times that he is not making a Marxist argument; false consciousness, he often declares, does not apply; the Frankfurt School applied ideologically charged labels too cavalierly and even “a little hysterically”

(p. 219), although the book also acknowledges this perspective's value. More significantly, there are a few times where the argument could be pushed further. His critique of Adbusters, for example, mostly focuses on the "antibrand" brands that Adbusters and similar groups produce, such as the "black spot" nonlogo sneaker. But this argument has been made several times by communication and consumer culture critics and is not as nuanced as that of Harold (2004), who argues that anticommercial pranks are a more effective and participatory form of resistance than the "opt-out" message often espoused by Adbusters. This point would have complicated the book's discussion of both the carnivalesque and the culture jamming.

That being said, Barber is a public intellectual and should be commended as such. Targeted to a broad readership, *Consumed* is a "big idea" book that is critical of anti-democratic corporate and commercial trends, and such books are rare and important.

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References

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