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# PART I

## THE FORMAL LITURGY OF THE OBJECT

### 1

## Profusion

There is all around us today a kind of fantastic conspicuousness of consumption and abundance, constituted by the multiplication of objects, services and material goods, and this represents something of a fundamental mutation in the ecology of the human species. Strictly speaking, the humans of the age of affluence are surrounded not so much by other human beings, as they were in all previous ages, but by objects. Their daily dealings are now not so much with their fellow men, but rather – on a rising statistical curve – with the reception and manipulation of goods and messages. This runs from the very complex organization of the household, with its dozens of technical slaves, to street furniture and the whole material machinery of communication; from professional activities to the permanent spectacle of the celebration of the object in advertising and the hundreds of daily messages from the mass media; from the minor proliferation of vaguely obsessional gadgetry to the symbolic psychodramas fuelled by the nocturnal objects which come to haunt us even in our dreams. The two concepts 'environment' and 'ambience' have doubtless only enjoyed such a vogue since we have come to live not so much alongside other human beings – in their physical presence and the presence of their speech – as beneath the mute gaze of mesmerizing, obedient objects which endlessly repeat the same refrain: that of our dumbfounded power, our virtual affluence, our absence one from another. Just as the wolf-child became a wolf by living among wolves, so we too are slowly becoming functional. We live by object time: by this I mean that we live at the pace of objects, live to the rhythm of their ceaseless succession. Today, it is we who watch them as they are born, grow to maturity and die, whereas in all previous civilizations it was timeless objects, instruments or monuments which outlived the generations of human beings.

Objects are neither a flora nor a fauna. And yet they do indeed give the impression of a proliferating vegetation, a jungle in which the new wild man of modern times has difficulty recovering the reflexes of civilization.

We have to attempt rapidly to describe this fauna and flora, which man has produced and which comes back to encircle and invade him as it might in a bad science fiction novel. We have to describe these things as we see and experience them, never forgetting, in their splendour and profusion, that they are *the product of a human activity* and are dominated not by natural ecological laws, but by the law of exchange-value.

The busiest streets of London are crowded with shops whose show cases display all the riches of the world, Indian shawls, American revolvers, Chinese porcelain, Parisian corsets, furs from Russia and spices from the tropics, but all of these worldly things bear odious, white paper labels with Arabic numerals and the laconic symbols £.s.d. This is how commodities are presented in circulation. (Marx)

### Profusion and the Package

*Profusion*, piling high are clearly the most striking descriptive features. The big department stores, with their abundance of canned foods and clothing, of foodstuffs and ready-made garments, are like the primal landscape, the geometrical locus of abundance. But every street, with its cluttered, glittering shop-windows (the least scarce commodity here being light, without which the merchandise would be merely what it is), their displays of cooked meats, and indeed the entire alimentary and vestimentary feast, all stimulate magical salivation. There is something more in this piling high than the quantity of products: the manifest presence of surplus, the magical, definitive negation of scarcity, the maternal, luxurious sense of being already in the Land of Cockaigne. Our markets, major shopping thoroughfares and superstores also mimic a new-found nature of prodigious fecundity. These are our Valleys of Canaan where, in place of milk and honey, streams of neon flow down over ketchup and plastic. But no matter! We find here the fervid hope that there should be not enough, but too much – and too much for everyone: by buying a piece of this land, you acquire the crumbling pyramid of oysters, meats, pears or tinned asparagus. You buy the part for the whole. And this metonymic, repetitive discourse of consumable matter, of the *commodity*, becomes once again, through a great collective metaphor – by virtue of its very excess – the image of the *gift*, and of that inexhaustible and spectacular prodigality which characterizes the *feast*.

Beyond stacking, which is the most rudimentary yet cogent form of abundance, objects are organized in *packages* or *collections*. Almost all the shops selling clothing or household appliances offer a *range* of differentiated objects, evoking, echoing and offsetting one another. The antique dealer's window provides the aristocratic, luxury version of these sets of objects, which evoke not so much a superabundance of substance as a *gamut* of select and complementary objects presented for the consumer to choose among, but presented also to create in him a psychological chain reaction, as he peruses them, inventories them and

grasps them as a total category. Few objects today are offered *alone*, without a context of objects which 'speaks' them. And this changes the consumer's relation to the object: he no longer relates to a particular object in its specific utility, but to a set of objects in its total signification. Washing machine, refrigerator and dishwasher taken together have a different meaning from the one each has individually as an appliance. The shop-window, the advertisement, the manufacturer and the *brand name*, which here plays a crucial role, impose a coherent, collective vision, as though they were an almost indissociable totality, a series. This is, then, no longer a sequence of mere objects, but a chain of *signifiers*, in so far as all of these signify one another reciprocally as part of a more complex super-object, drawing the consumer into a series of more complex motivations. It is evident that objects are never offered for consumption in absolute disorder. They may, in certain cases, imitate disorder the better to seduce, but they are always arranged to mark out directive paths, to orientate the purchasing impulse towards *networks* of objects in order to captivate that impulse and bring it, in keeping with its own logic, to the highest degree of commitment, to the limits of its economic potential. Clothing, machines and toiletries thus constitute object *pathways*, which establish inertial constraints in the consumer: he will move *logically* from one object to another. He will be caught up in a *calculus* of objects, and this is something quite different from the frenzy of buying and acquisitiveness to which the simple profusion of commodities gives rise.

### The Drugstore

The synthesis of profusion and calculation is the drugstore. The drugstore (or the new shopping centre) achieves a synthesis of consumer activities, not the least of which are shopping, flirting with objects, playful wandering and all the permutational possibilities of these. In this respect, the drugstore is more representative of modern consumption than the department stores. There, the quantitative centralization of the products leaves less margin for ludic exploration, the arrangement of departments and products imposing a more utilitarian path on the consumer. And, generally, the large stores retain something of the period in which they emerged, when broad classes of the population were first gaining access to *everyday* consumer goods. There is a quite different meaning to the drugstore: it does not juxtapose categories of merchandise, but *lumps signs together indiscriminately*, lumps together all categories of commodities, which are regarded as partial fields of a sign-consuming totality. In the drugstore, the *cultural centre becomes part of the shopping centre*. It would be simplistic to say that culture is 'prostituted' there. *It is-culturalized*. Simultaneously, commodities (clothing, groceries, catering etc.) are also culturalized in their turn, since they

are transformed into the substance of play and distinction, into luxury accessories, into one element among others in the general *package* of consumables.

A new art of living, a new way of living, say the adverts – a 'switched-on' daily experience. You can shop pleasantly in a single air-conditioned location, buy your food there, purchase things for your flat or country cottage – clothing, flowers, the latest novel or the latest gadget. And you can do all this in a single trip, while husband and children watch a film, and then all dine together right there.

There's a café, a cinema, a bookshop, places to buy trinkets, clothing and lots more in the shopping centres: the drugstore takes in everything in kaleidoscopic mode. If the department store offers the fairground spectacle of commodities, the drugstore presents the subtle recital of consumption, the whole 'art' of which consists in playing on the ambiguity of the sign in objects, and sublimating their status as things of use and as commodities in a play upon 'ambiance'. This is generalized neo-culture, where there is no longer any difference between a delicatessen and an art gallery, between *Playboy* and a treatise on palaeontology. And the drugstore is to modernize itself to the point of introducing 'grey matter':

Just selling products doesn't interest us. We want to put a bit of grey matter in there too . . . Three levels. A bar, a dancefloor and sales outlets. Knick-knacks, records, paperback books, intellectual books, a bit of everything. But we aren't trying to flatter the clientele. We are really offering them 'something'. A language laboratory operates on the second level. Among the records and books, you can find the major movements which are stirring our society. Experimental music, tones which explain our times. This is the 'grey matter' that goes with the products we sell. It's a drugstore, then, but a new-style drugstore with something extra – a little intelligence, perhaps, and a bit of human warmth.

The drugstore can become a whole town: this is the case with Parly 2 with its giant shopping centre in which 'art and leisure mingle with everyday life' and each group of residences radiates out from its swimming-pool, where the local clubhouse becomes its focus. A church built 'in the round', tennis courts ('the least we could do'), elegant boutiques and a library. The tiniest ski resort borrows this 'universalist' model of the drugstore: all activities there are encapsulated in, systematically combined around and centred on the basic concept of 'ambiance'. Thus Flaïne-la-Prodigue offers you a complete, all-purpose, combinatorial existence:

Our Mont Blanc, our spruce forests; our Olympic runs, our children's 'plateau'; our architecture carved, chiselled and polished like a work of art; the purity of the air we breathe; the refined ambiance of our Forum (modelled on the forums of Mediterranean towns. A lively time is to be had there after a day on the slopes. Cafés, restaurants, shops, skating-rinks, a night club, a cinema and a cultural and amusement centre are all located in the Forum to make the life you live off-piste particularly rich and varied); our internal TV system; our world-scale future (we shall soon be listed as a cultural monument by the Arts Ministry).<sup>2</sup>

We are at the point where consumption is laying hold of the whole of life, where all activities are sequenced in the same combinatorial mode, where the course of satisfaction is outlined in advance, hour by hour, where the 'environment' is total – fully air-conditioned, organized, culturalized. In the phenomenology of consumption, this general 'air-conditioning' of life, goods, objects, services, behaviour and social relations represents the perfected, 'consummated' [*consummé*] stage of an evolution which runs from affluence pure and simple, through interconnected networks of objects, to the total conditioning of action and time, and finally to the systematic atmospherics built into those cities of the future that are our drugstores. Parly 2s and modern airports.

#### Parly 2

'The biggest shopping centre in Europe.'

'Printemps, BHV, Dior, Prisunic, Lanvin, Franck et Fils, Hédiard, two cinemas, a drugstore, a Suma supermarket, a hundred other shops – all in a single location!'

In the choice of shops, from grocery to high fashion, two imperatives: commercial dynamism and aesthetic sense. The famous slogan, 'Ugliness doesn't sell', is now *passé*. It might be replaced by: 'The beauty of the setting is the prime requirement for happy living.'

A two-storey structure organized around a central mall, which is the split-level main thoroughfare – the triumphal avenue. Small- and large-scale traders reconciled. The modern pace of life reconciled with age-old idle wandering.

The unprecedented comfort of strolling among shops whose tempting wares are openly displayed on the mall, without even a shop-window for a screen, the mall itself being a combination of the rue de la Paix and the Champs-Élysées. Adorned with fountains, artificial trees, pavilions and benches, it is wholly exempt from changes of season or bad weather: an exceptional system of climate control, requiring 13 kilometres of air-conditioning ducts, makes for perpetual springtime.

Not only can you buy anything here, from shoelaces to an airline ticket; not only can you find insurance companies and cinemas, banks or medical services, bridge clubs and art exhibitions, but you are not a slave to the clock. The mall, like any street, is accessible night and day, seven days a week.

Naturally, for those who want it, the centre has introduced the most modern style of payment: the 'credit card'. This frees shoppers from cheques or cash – and even from financial difficulties. To pay, you just show your card and sign the bill. There's nothing more to it. And every month you get a statement which you can pay off in full or in monthly instalments.

In this marriage of comfort, beauty and efficiency, the Parlysiens are discovering the material conditions of happiness which our anarchic cities denied them.

We are here at the heart of consumption as total organization of everyday life, total homogenization, where everything is taken over and superseded in the ease and translucidity of an abstract 'happiness', defined solely by the resolution of tensions. The drugstore writ large in the form of the shopping centre, the city of the future, is the *sublimata* of all real life, of all objective social life, in which not only work and money disappear, but also the seasons, those distant vestiges of a cycle which has at last also been homogenized! Work, leisure, nature and culture: all

these things which were once dispersed, which once generated anxiety and complexity in real life, in our 'anarchic and archaic towns and cities', all these sundered activities, these activities which were more or less irreducible one to another, are now at last mixed and blended, climatized and homogenized in the same sweeping vista of perpetual shopping. All are now rendered sexless in the same hermaphroditic ambience of fashion! All at last *digested* and turned into the same homogeneous faecal matter (naturally enough, this occurs precisely under the sign of the disappearance of *liquid cash* - too visible a symbol still of the *real* faecality of real life, and of the economic and social contradictions which once inhabited it). That is all over now. *Controlled*, lubricated, *consumed* faecality has passed into things; it seeps everywhere into the indistinctness of things and social relations. Just as the gods of all countries coexisted syncretically in the Roman Pantheon in an immense 'digest', so all the gods - or demons - of consumption have come together in our Super Shopping Centre, which is our Pantheon - or Pandaemonium. In other words, all activities, labour, conflicts and seasons have been united and abolished in the same abstraction. The substance of life unified in this way, in this universal digest, can no longer have in it any *meaning*: what constituted the dreamwork, the labour of poetry and of meaning - in other words, the grand schemata of displacement and condensation, the great figures of metaphor and contradiction, which are based on the living interconnection of distinct elements - is no longer possible. The eternal substitution of homogeneous elements now reigns unchallenged. There is no longer any symbolic function, but merely an eternal combinatory of 'ambience' in a perpetual springtime.

## 2

## The Miraculous Status of Consumption

The Melanesian natives were thrilled by the planes which passed overhead. But those objects never came down from the skies to them, whereas they did descend for the whites, doing so because there were, in certain places, similar objects on the ground to attract the flying aircraft. So, the natives themselves set about building a simulacrum of an aeroplane from branches and creepers. They marked out a landing-ground, which they painstakingly illuminated by night, and patiently waited for the real aircraft to alight on it.

Without calling the anthropoid hunter-gatherers who today wander through our urban jungles primitives (though why not?), we might see this as a fable of the consumer society. The beneficiary of the consumer miracle also sets in place a whole array of sham objects, of characteristic signs of happiness, and then waits (waits desperately, a moralist would say) for happiness to alight.

I do not mean to present this as a principle of analysis. What we have here is simply the private and collective consumer *mentality*. But at this rather superficial level, we may venture this comparison: consumption is governed by a form of *magical thinking*; daily life is governed by a mentality based on miraculous thinking, a primitive mentality, in so far as that has been defined as being based on a belief in the omnipotence of thoughts (though what we have in this case is a belief in the omnipotence of signs). 'Affluence' is, in effect, merely the accumulation of the signs of happiness. The satisfactions which the objects themselves confer are the equivalent of the fake aircraft, the Melanesians' models, i.e. the anticipated reflection of the potential Great Satisfaction, of the Total Affluence, the last jubilation of the definitive beneficiaries of the miracle, from whose insane hope daily banality draws its sustenance. These lesser satisfactions are as yet only exorcistic practices, means of calling down or summoning up total Well-being or Bliss.

In everyday practice, the blessings of consumption are not experienced as resulting from work or from a production process; they are experienced as a *miracle*. There is, admittedly, a difference between the Melanesian native and the viewer settling down in front of his TV set, turning the switch and waiting for images from the whole world to come down to him: the fact is that the images generally obey, whereas planes never condescend to land by magical command. But this technical

success is not sufficient to show that our conduct is realistic and the natives' behaviour imaginary. For the same psychological economy ensues on the one hand that the natives' confidence in magic is never destroyed (if the process fails to work, it is because they have not performed the necessary acts) and on the other that the miracle of TV is perpetually brought off, *without ceasing to be a miracle* – this latter by the grace of technology, which wipes out, so far as the consumer's consciousness is concerned, the very principle of social reality, the long social process of production which leads to the consumption of images. And does this so well that the TV viewer, like the native, experiences the appropriation as a *capturing* in a mode of miraculous efficacy.

### The Cargo Myth

Consumer goods thus present themselves as a *harnessing of power*, not as products embodying work. And, more generally, once severed from its objective determinations, the profusion of goods is felt as a *blessing of nature*, as a manna, a gift from heaven. On contact with the whites, the Melanesians (to turn again to them) developed a Messianic form of worship: the cargo cult. The whites, they reasoned, lived lives of plenty, whereas they had nothing. This was because the whites knew how to capture or divert the goods that were destined for them, the blacks, by their ancestors who had withdrawn to the ends of the earth. One day, when the white men's magic had been foiled, their ancestors would return with the miraculous cargo, and they would never again know want.

Thus 'underdeveloped' peoples experience Western 'aid' as something natural and expected, something long due to them. As a magical remedy – having no relation to history, technology, continued progress and the world market. But if we look at all closely at them, do not the Western beneficiaries of the economic miracle behave collectively in the same way? Does not the mass of consumers experience plenty as an *effect of nature*, surrounded as they are by the fantasies of the Land of Cockaigne and persuaded by the advertisers' litany that all will be given to them and that they have a legitimate, inalienable right to plenty? Faith in consumption is a new element; the rising generations are now inheritors: they no longer merely inherit goods, but *the natural right to abundance*. And so the cargo myth lives again in the West whereas it is declining in Melanesia. For even if abundance is becoming a banal, daily fact, it continues to be experienced as a daily miracle, in so far as it does not appear to be something produced and extracted, something won after a historical and social effort, but something *dispensed* by a beneficent mythological agency to which we are the legitimate heirs: Technology, Progress, Growth, etc.

This does not mean that our society is not firstly, objectively and

decisively a society of production, *an order of production*, and therefore the site of an economic and political strategy. But it means that there is entangled with that order an *order of consumption*, which is an order of the manipulation of signs. To that extent, we may draw a (no doubt venturesome) parallel with magical thought, for both of these *live off signs and under the protection of signs*. More and more basic aspects of our contemporary societies fall under a logic of significations, an analysis of codes and symbolic systems – though this does not make these societies primitive ones, and the problem of the *historical production* of these significations and codes remains fully intact – that analysis having to articulate itself to the analysis of the process of material and technical production as its theoretical continuation.

### The Consumed Vertigo of Catastrophe

The usage of signs is always ambivalent. Its function is always a conjuring – both a conjuring up and a conjuring away: causing something to emerge in order to capture it in signs (forces, reality, happiness, etc.) and evoking something in order to deny and repress it. We know that, in its myths, magical thought seeks to conjure away change and history. In a way, the generalized consumption of images, of facts, of information aims also to *conjure away the real with the signs of the real*, to conjure away history with the signs of change, etc.

Reality we consume in either anticipatory or retrospective mode. At any rate we do so at a distance, a distance which is that of the sign. For example, when *Paris-Match* showed us the secret forces assigned to protect the General [de Gaulle] training with machine-guns in the basement of the Prefecture, that image was not read as 'information', i.e. as referring to the political context and its elucidation. For every one of us, it bore within it the temptation of a superb assassination attempt, a prodigious violent event: the attempt will take place, it is *going to take place*; the image is the forerunner to it, and embodies the anticipated pleasure; all perversions have their acting-out. What we see here is the same inverse effect as in the expectation of miraculous abundance within the cargo cult. Cargo or catastrophe – in both cases, we have an effect of consumed vertigo.

We may, admittedly, say that it is, then, our fantasies which come to be signified in the image and consumed in it. But this psychological aspect interests us less than what comes into the image to be both consumed in it and repressed: the real world, the event, history.

What characterizes consumer society is the *universality of the news item* [le fait divers] in mass communication. All political, historical and cultural information is received in the same – at once anodyne and miraculous – form of the news item. It is entirely *actualized* – i.e. dramatized in the spectacular mode – and entirely *deactualized* – i.e. distanced by the

communication medium and reduced to signs. The news item is thus not one category among others, but the cardinal category of our magical thinking, of our mythology.

That mythology is buttressed by the all the more voracious demand for reality, for 'truth', for 'objectivity'. Everywhere we find '*cinéma-vérité*', live reporting, the newsflash, the high-impact photo, the eye-witness report, etc. Everywhere what is sought is the 'heart of the event', the 'heart of the battle', the 'live', the 'face to face' – the dizzy sense of a total presence at the event, the Great Thrill of Lived Reality – i.e. the miracle once again, since the truth of the media report, televised and taped, is precisely that *I was not there*. But it is the truer than true which counts or, in other words, the fact of being there without being there. Or, to put it yet another way, the *fantasy*.

What mass communications give us is not reality, but the *dizzying whirl of reality* [*le vertige de la réalité*]. Or again, without playing on words, a reality without the dizzying whirl, for the heart of Amazonia, the heart of reality, the heart of passion, the heart of war, this 'Heart' which is the locus of mass communications and which gives them their vertiginous sentimentality, is precisely the *place where nothing happens*. It is the allegorical sign of passion and of the event. And signs are sources of security.

So we live, sheltered by signs, in the denial of the real. A miraculous security: when we look at the images of the world, who can distinguish this brief irruption of reality from the profound pleasure of not being there? The image, the sign, the message – all these things we 'consume' – represent our tranquility consecrated by distance from the world, a distance more comforted by the allusion to the real (even where the allusion is violent) than compromised by it.

The content of the messages, the signifieds of the signs are largely immaterial. We are not engaged in them, and the media do not involve us in the world, but offer for our consumption signs as signs, albeit signs accredited with the guarantee of the real. It is here that we can define the *praxis of consumption*. The consumer's relation to the real world, to politics, to history, to culture is not a relation of interest, investment or committed responsibility – nor is it one of total indifference: it is a relation of curiosity. On the same pattern, we can say that the dimension of consumption as we have defined it here is not one of knowledge of the world, nor is it one of total ignorance: it is the dimension of **misrecognition**.

Curiosity and misrecognition denote one and the same form of overall behaviour towards the real, a form of behaviour generalized and systematized by the practice of mass communications and characteristic, therefore, of our 'consumer society'. This is the denial of the real on the basis of an avid and repeated apprehending of its signs.

We can at the same time define the *locus of consumption*: daily life. This latter is not merely the sum of daily doings, the dimension of banality

and repetition: it is a *system of interpretation*. Everydayness is the separation of a total praxis into a transcendent, autonomous and abstract sphere (of the political, the social, the cultural) and the immanent, closed, abstract sphere of the 'private'. Work, leisure, family, acquaintances: the individual reorganizes all these things in an involutive mode, this side of the world and of history, in a coherent system based on the closure of the private, the formal freedom of the individual, the securitizing appropriation of the environment, and misrecognition. Everydayness is, from the objective point of view of the totality, impoverished and residual, but it is, by contrast, triumphant and euphoric in its effort totally to autonomize and reinterpret the world 'for internal consumption'. It is here that there is profound, organic collusion between the sphere of private everydayness and mass communications.

Everydayness as closure, as *Verborgenheit*, would be unbearable without the simulacrum of the world, without the *alibi* of participation in the world. It has to be fuelled by the images, the repeated signs of that transcendence. As we have seen, its tranquillity needs the vertiginous spin of reality and history. Its tranquillity requires perpetual *consumed* violence for its own exaltation. That is its particular obscenity. It is partial to events and violence, provided the violence is served up at room temperature. The caricature image of this has the TV viewer lounging in front of images of the Vietnam War. The TV image, like a window turned outside-in, opens initially on to a room and, in that room, the cruel exteriority of the world becomes something intimate and warm – warm with a perverse warmth.

At this 'lived' level, consumption makes maximum exclusion from the (real, social, historical) world the maximum index of security. It seeks the resolution of tensions – that happiness by default. But it runs up against a contradiction: the contradiction between the passivity implied by this new value system and the norms of a social morality which, in essentials, remains one of voluntarism, action, efficacy and sacrifice. Hence, the intense sense of guilt which attaches to this new style of hedonistic behaviour and the urgent need, clearly outlined by the 'strategists of desire', to take the guilt out of passivity. For millions of people without histories, and happy to be so, passivity has to be rendered guiltless. And this is where spectacular dramatization by the mass media comes in (the accident/catastrophe report as a generalized category of all messages): in order for this contradiction between puritanical and hedonistic morality to be resolved, this tranquillity of the private sphere has to appear as a value *preserved only with great difficulty*, constantly under threat and beset by the dangers of a catastrophic destiny. The violence and inhumanity of the outside world are needed not just so that security may be experienced more deeply as security (in the economy of enjoyment [*jouissance*]), but also so that it should be felt *justifiable* at every moment as an option (in the economy of the morality of salvation). The signs of destiny, passion and fatality must flourish around the preserved zone in order

that everydayness may seize back the grandeur and sublimity of which it is, precisely, the reverse side. Fatality is thus evoked and signified on all sides, so that banality may revel in it and find favour. The fact that road accidents play so extraordinarily well on radio and TV, in the press, in individual conversation and in the talk of the nation proves this: the crash is the finest exemplar of 'daily fatality'. If it is exploited with such passion, this is because it performs an essential collective function. The litany of road deaths is rivalled only by the litany of weather forecasts. In fact the two form a mythic couple - the obsession with the sun and the litany of death are inseparable.

Everydayness thus offers this curious mix of euphoric justification by 'social standing' and passivity, on the one hand, and the *delectatio morosa* of potential victims of destiny on the other. The whole forms a specific mentality or, rather, 'sentimentality'. The consumer society sees itself as an encircled Jerusalem, rich and threatened. That is its ideology.<sup>1</sup>

## 3

## The Vicious Circle of Growth

## Collective Expenditure and Redistribution

Consumer society is not characterized merely by the rapid growth of individual expenditure. It is also accompanied by the growth of expenditure met by third parties (by the government in particular) for the benefit of private individuals, the purpose of some of this being to reduce the inequality of the distribution of resources.

This proportion of collective expenditure meeting individual needs has risen from 13 per cent of total consumption in 1959 to 17 per cent in 1965. In 1965, the percentage of needs met by third parties was:

- 1 per cent for food and clothing ('subsistence');
- 13 per cent for housing expenses, transport and communication networks ('the environment');
- 67 per cent in the fields of education, culture, sport and health ('protection and development of the person').

Collective expenditure is clearly channelled more towards human beings, then, than into the goods and material equipment made available for their use. Similarly, public expenditure is at its highest under the budget heads which look set to grow fastest. But it is interesting to note, with E. Lisle, that it was precisely in this sector where the community assumes the greater part of expenditure, in the sector which it has developed most intensively, that the crisis of May 1968 broke out.

In France, the 'social budget of the nation' redistributes more than 20 per cent of gross internal production (the national education system alone absorbs the total of taxes on personal incomes). The heavy disparity between private consumption and collective expenditure which Galbraith attacks seems much more characteristic of the United States than of the European nations. But this is not the issue. The real problem is whether *this state expenditure makes for an objective equalization of social chances*. Now, it seems clear that this 'redistribution' has little effect on social discrimination at all levels. As for inequality of standards of living, comparison of the two studies on family budgets made in 1956 and 1965 shows no reduction in the discrepancies. We know the incurable, hereditary disparities which apply in the field of education: where other mechanisms more subtle than the economic are in play, the use of economic redistribution alone very largely amounts to reinforcing the mechanisms of cultural inertia. The proportion of 17-year-olds in full-