

Shopping with love

A few years ago Sandie and I were in London to spend Christmas with my parents who gave her a cardigan which was unfortunately the wrong size. Because we were travelling home on the 27th we decided to walk up to the local shopping centre on Boxing Day to exchange the item as the shop in question was open for the first day of what used to be called the New Year Sales.

We do not frequent large shopping centres often, and I can never recall us attending the opening day of the sales, so perhaps we had naïve expectations but we were truly shocked by what we saw.

Barely 24 hours after the pinnacle of consumer indulgence and satisfaction on Christmas morning the mall was absolutely packed with people, most of whom seemed to be driven by desperation for another consumer hit. Some shoppers were fighting over individual purchase in bizarre pastiches of tug of war which would have been comical if they had not been tragically pathetic. Others were frantically searching through piles of merchandise, dropping unwanted items on the floor where they were trampled uncaringly by hordes of shoppers shouldering their way past each other in a manner that would have been unseemly in an unruly football crowd.

There seemed to be no intrinsic pleasure or reward in the items themselves and no understanding of their cost in human or environmental terms. The object of the exercise was simply to satisfy a compulsive craving for more. It was obvious that for many consumers there is no such thing as enough, just as is the case with any other addict, regardless of the object of their addiction.

In many ways such behaviour by consumers increasingly resembles Marxist notions of commodity fetishism in that we expect an inanimate commodity to somehow gratify our desires despite the fact that we have stripped away all the empathetic human and environmental inter-relationships between raw material producers, manufacturers, retailers and consumers which imbue that commodity with any intrinsic, lasting value.

In essence the value of, and context for, our social relationships has been removed and money has become the only way of expressing the worth of anything, including ourselves. Although we used to at least be aware of the monetary cost of our purchases the widespread use of instant credit has undermined even that limited understanding of value and we certainly have no depth of feeling for the landscape which grew the tree, the forester that tended the woodland or the craftsman who realised the potential in the timber and converted it into a useful, aesthetically pleasing and desirable product anymore than we can envisage the sea and the fisherman or the farmer and his livestock.

All these relationships have been increasingly eroded as globalisation, megastores, credit cards self-service tills and on-line shopping have made the creation, distribution and acquisition of consumer goods a depersonalised act based on narrow de-humanised financial transactions rather than on a network of feeling, empathetic interrelationships that endows it with enduring meaning and value. This depersonalisation reduces consumerism to something akin to a pornographic act rather than a pleasurable or, to continue the metaphor, erotic act. As such it brings no satisfaction, and leaves the addict craving more.

Accelerating and unsustainable levels of consumption by comparatively affluent populations lie at the heart of climate change and related environmental and social issues. If we are to address this problem in any meaningful way we first need to re-establish humanity, empathy and emotional feeling in our economic and environmental relationships and place both production and consumption in a context framed by community inter-relationships. Only then will we imbue the goods we buy with the emotional content required to satisfy the unrequited needs that drive us to compulsive consumption and allow us to restore some measure of sanity to our pursuit of happiness and contentment.