

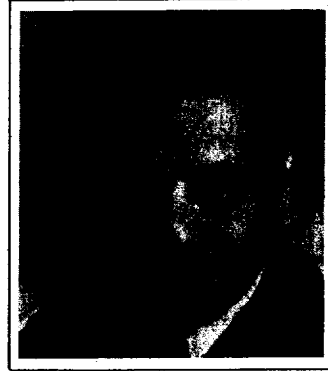
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REDEFINING THE GOOD LIFE

By Amitai Etzioni

The past two decades have seen a widespread reexamination of social values in the United States and elsewhere. The traditional commitment to mass production and consumerism seems to be giving way to an emphasis on the quality of life instead of the quantity of goods. Professor Etzioni here suggests the new directions of current opinion on the subject.

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When attempting to find a useful perspective from which to view such a complex phenomenon as American society, it is fruitful to focus on "the societal project." A society's project may be viewed as those endeavors around which the principal efforts of its members are organized. For Tanzania, the central project may be the furtherance of economic and social development; for Nazi Germany, it was war and conquest; for most Western societies since the industrial revolution, the central project has involved the mass production of consumer goods and services.

The term *project* is adopted from the French existentialists, who used it to refer to individuals rather than social groupings. Accordingly, persons are characterized by what they are endeavoring to become, not by what they are at present. Not a student, but a physician in the making; not a neurotic, but an individual in search of ways to manage anxiety; and so on. While the project is aimed at realizing a future state, its influence and force are very much in evidence (and measurable) in the present, because the future vision the project entails serves as a principal source of meaning and organization for current efforts. Thus, the student-physician—in anticipation of the day he or she will earn a high income, treat the poor or eradicate an illness—is borrowing money, staying up nights and sacrificing current income and pleasures. What explains a person's conduct then is not so much the current circumstances as the future goal he or she is trying to realize.

We suggest that it is helpful to view societies as if they were organized around one or more projects. This contrasts with the view that

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societies are communities, assortments of groups or populations arranged in stratified structures. To present society as a project is to see it as capable of collective action, of directing its efforts toward shared purposes. True, no society is ever completely mobilized. Even in the extremities of war, as when Britain was severely threatened in 1939-40, a significant part of her activities as a society still did not involve the defense effort. But project-related activities are those that provide the society with its unique characteristics and direction, in addition to forming the context within which other activities are carried out.

Questioning Consumer Values

For America since the 1890s, particularly during peacetime, the central project has been to mass-produce ever more goods and services. Of course, some members have accrued a significantly larger share than others; nevertheless, the standard of living for most Americans has risen over the years. Recently, however, this project has come under serious challenge. It is true that throughout recent American history there have been a few intellectuals who were not enamored of the worship of material success, the cult of "more," the definition of the good life as the production and consumption of more and more consumer goods. But in recent years, these sentiments have gained a much greater following. A combination of the counter-culture residue of the 1960s and the energy crisis of the 1970s has led a majority of Americans to question the value of the industrial-consumption project.

Two recent Harris polls are particularly illuminating. Asked about choices America has to make, only 17 percent of a national sample favored setting the goal at "reaching higher standards of living"; while 79 percent chose "teaching people how to live more with the basic essentials." Further, 15 percent favored "improving and speeding up our ability to communicate with one another through better technology" versus 77 percent "spending more time getting to know one another better as human beings on a person-to-person basis." Twenty-two percent endorsed the search for bigger and better things versus 66 percent who favored more "humanized" living, and so on. Similarly, an August 1977 Harris survey showed that many of the values that only ten years ago were regarded as the province of the younger generation have now been adopted by the mainstream of Americans. Thus, 65 percent believe that modern technology "furthers the program of society more than the progress of the individual"; 61 percent, that such technology creates as many problems as it solves. Sixty percent are anti-bigness; 73 percent would rather live in open country than in a city.

While it is true that public opinion polls can be misleading, e.g.,

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people may express their nobler sentiments in answer to a pollster, while actually continuing in their old pursuits, the very fact that no new consensus is emerging as to what is considered "good" is significant. And there are other indications that Americans feel this way. Thus, while there is still a substantial increase in the number of women who join the labor force, there is a tidal wave of voluntary retirement—before age 65. In addition, millions are choosing "second careers" that are often less lucrative (and therefore allow for fewer purchases of goods and services) than their original jobs but are seen to be more intrinsically satisfying. Still others devote less zeal to their work and more to improving their "inner space" and pursuing leisure activities that require relatively few purchases. The list of the most popular American hobbies for 1977 was headed by gardening (36 million families participating); stamp collecting (16 million); playing bridge and chess and researching one's genealogy (10 million each).

The old production-consumption project is far from dead. It still dominates our established institutions and forms our official values. Nor can the possibility be ruled out that the commitment to the materialistic way of life will be rekindled. But one conclusion seems relatively clear: at present, the production-consumption project no longer commands the compelling power it once had for generations of Americans (particularly those who grew up during the Great Depression era). Whether Americans will rally around an alternative societal project or recommit themselves to the old one, only the next decade will tell.

