On re-reading Packard's *The Hidden Persuaders*

Of all the ideas put forward by Karl Marx one that has always resonated with me is his view that people are 'authors' of their society yet have forgotten their authorship. In one sense this is unexceptional. Not everyone has the time, opportunity or breadth of mind to appreciate the social construction of reality, the uses of legitimation and the many ways that powerful interests favour themselves above others. On the other hand there's something increasingly bizarre about the way that entire populations in the rich West have been sold a notion of 'the good life' based on a 20th century invention known as affluent consumerism. For if one thing has become clear it's the undeniable fact that this way of life has been on a collision course with planetary systems for some time. As Sam Alexander puts it:

> Capitalism wants or needs what it cannot have: that is, limitless growth on a finite planet. This ecological predicament is the defining contradiction of capitalism in the 21st century, insofar as growth is now causing the problems that growth was supposed to be solving (Alexander, 2018).

While browsing recently in a small bookshop in Wigtown, Scotland, I came across a Penguin paperback of Vance Packard's book *The Hidden Persuaders*, first published in 1956. It's perhaps 50 years since I first read it but it left a strong impression. It's almost certainly one of the underlying reasons I've never accepted full-on commercial advertising as anything other than what Donella Meadows called 'an unwanted tax on humanity'. (She also said that 'you only have to spend millions on promoting something if its worth is in doubt.')

The Hidden Persuaders provides a snapshot of the US advertising industry in the mid-1950s - a relatively early stage in its development. Packard begins by explaining why marketeers adopted the 'depth approach' - by which he meant the study of human psychology specifically for the manipulation of behaviour. A problem for the marketeers at the time was that their 'factories had ever-larger warehouses full of goods to move.' From a standard point of view this could be seen as a 'good thing' since it suggested higher material standards of living. But a view was emerging that suggested 'we must consume more and more, *whether we want to or not*, for the good of our economy.' This is clearly one of the sources of the myth, central to Capitalism, that 'growth is good.' Packard also noted that 'fortunately for the ad men the supply of social scientists to draw from had multiplied in profusion within the decade.' From then on 'recruitment gained momentum (as) hundreds of social scientists gravitated into making depth studies for marketers.' Consequently,

> merchandisers of many different products began developing a startling new view of their prospective customers. People's subsurface desires, needs, and drives were probed in order to find their points of vulnerability... Once these ... were located, the psychological hooks were fashioned and baited and placed deep in the merchandising sea for unwary prospective customers.

One area that attracted close attention was the calculated manipulation of self-images. Success was subsequently measured by the fact that the latter were 'soon expediting the movement of hundreds of millions of dollars worth of merchandise to consumers, particularly gasoline, cigarettes and automobiles'. Packard's account shows in some detail how an evolving understanding of human psychology was employed in ways that compromised human agency on an unprecedented scale. From its inception this knowledge was used to undermine and belittle legitimate human interests in dignity, privacy, integrity, freedom of choice and so on. Its goal was to replace these with a range of substitutes favoured by, or invented by, the market. Enormous amounts of money were spent on these society-wide manipulations. One study even went so far as to characterise the children of America as 'consumer trainees.' None of this is to assume that US citizens were stupid or mere passive dupes. But it's also clear that no effective countervailing forces arose that were able to challenge these overtly degrading initiatives. The marketeers prevailed because their work fitted perfectly with the growth imperatives of global capitalism.

Six decades later these very same interests have been globalised, along with their strategies of mass deception and reality avoidance. They continue to display levels of entitlement and

influence that cannot but be counter-productive in an imperilled, overshoot world. They constitute a cultural force and a set of embedded practices that profoundly affect - but also reach far beyond - the lives and actions of individuals. At the very time when major shifts in the global system have made it abundantly clear that we need to be re-thinking and re-negotiating the foundations of the social and economic order, commercial interests strive ever harder to project their custom-designed 'clouds of unknowing' across the world. This may be one of many reasons why so many US voters were sufficiently confused, so out of touch, as to elect as president a profoundly inadequate, deeply insecure individual from a reality TV show with no conception whatever of the global dilemmas bearing down humankind. The advertising industry is by no means the only culprit but it's worth emphasising that it never sought, nor was given, anything remotely like a social licence to operate as it does. It was allowed to infiltrate civic culture and economic life much as the Internet oligarchs do today.

When the values of heartless advertising and those of hi-tech innovation came together in the shape of Internet oligarchs they pushed through a door left open by poor governance and manifestly inadequate values. The anti-trust legislation that in earlier times served to break up monopolies and constrain organisational over-growth was set aside. There was never anything inevitable about the way that the 'IT revolution' as presently constituted proceeded to disrupt almost everything in its path. Greedy, power hungry and narrow-minded entrepreneurs walked away from the libertarian values held by some of the pioneers who had sought to provide openness and freedom. Instead the revolution reverted to more basic ones that entailed overt exploitation. Consequently much of what now falls under the heading of 'the Internet' acquired dystopian aspects as it undermined human agency and infiltrated the most private and personal spaces of human lives. One can therefore trace a direct line from the US merchandisers of the early 1950s to the regressive character of social media and Internet as they currently exist.

This helps to explain why many people who are immersed in what they have been constantly assured are well established and viable ways of life find it difficult to appreciate how the underpinnings of affluent consumerism are falling away beneath us all. Decades of immersion in processes of 'industrial scale' deception have left millions confused about what their real needs, their true identities and their actual responsibilities to present and future generations might actually look like. In this context actively exploring alternatives is no longer the domain of visionaries and dreamers. It has become an essential attribute of citizenship. One starting point is greater clarity about the many contradictory forces at work in civic culture. It's become clear, for example, that one of the biggest challenges of our time is the need to shift from a growth-and-consumption trajectory to a contraction, or steady state, one with far lower levels of energy use and consumption across the board. Yet influential figures in Australia seem content to promote 'New World Cities' memes favoured by developers, thereby promoting fantasy visions of high-tech, high-rise, high-density futures. None appreciate the coming energy crunch that may well render many high-rise structures and high-density settlements uninhabitable. Current socio-centric worldviews cede far too much authority to growth-addicted economics and, as a result, the world appears safer and more durable than it really is. Those holding such views simply do not appreciate the profound systemic risks already being run simply by ignoring global limits. World-centric perspectives, however, reveal a very different picture. For example, in a recent article George Monbiot had this to say:

> Public figures talk and act as if environmental change will be linear and gradual. But the Earth's systems are highly complex, and complex systems do not respond to pressure in linear ways. When these systems interact (because the world's atmosphere, oceans, land surface and life forms do not sit placidly within the boxes that make study more convenient), their reactions to change become highly unpredictable. Small perturbations can ramify wildly. Tipping points are likely to remain invisible until we have passed them. We could see changes of state so abrupt and profound that no continuity can be safely assumed. Only one of the many life support systems on which we depend – soils, aquifers, rainfall, ice, the pattern of winds and currents, pollinators, biological abundance and diversity – need fail for everything to slide (Monbiot, 2018).

Before long the Great Barrier Reef will very likely bleach for the final time. But even then there will still be people who regard high-rise modular cities, coal mining, commercial sponsorship, poker machines and super casinos as useful economic activities. Yet the current 'free lunch' period of cheap and available fossil energy is all but over and we now know that 'green growth' is just another convenient illusion. Renewables will not be able to pick up the slack and fill the huge supply gaps that will appear. Yet strategies based on 'de-growth', slowing down and reducing demand - strategies that could actually make a real difference - remain literally unthinkable. It's easier to expand airports and build new roads.

Under these conditions, the prospect of overshoot-and-collapse futures scares people who turn away and tune out in vast numbers. Default responses such as avoidance, evasion and denial remain all-too common. Reinforced over decades such ineffectual habits become normalised, unthinking and instinctive. This too is the legacy of the advertising industry and the powerful interests that continue to sustain it. By blindly pursuing their own narrow concerns they've delayed action on multiple fronts and ensured that adaptation to a radically different world will be far more costly and difficult than they will ever know. J.K. Galbraith touched on a very human aspect of this dilemma when he suggested that: 'faced with the choice between changing one's mind and proving that there is no need to do so, almost everyone gets busy on the proof.'

Today that is looking less like a clever aphorism and more like an epitaph for a way of life whose time is over.

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