

### 3. *Shopping and Other Spiritual Adventures in America Today*

PHYLLIS ROSE

In the following selection, which originally appeared in the *New York Times* in 1984, Phyllis Rose discusses the role that shopping plays in our lives.

Last year a new Waldbaum's Food Mart opened in the shopping mall on Route 66. It belongs to the new generation of superduper-markets open twenty-four hours that have computerized checkout. I went to see the place as soon as it opened and I was impressed. There was trail mix in Lucite bins. There was freshly made pasta. There were coffee beans, four kinds of tahini, ten kinds of herb teas, raw shrimp in shells and cooked shelled shrimp, fresh-squeezed orange juice. Every sophistication known to the big city, even goat's cheese covered with ash, was now available in Middletown, Conn. People raced from the warehouse aisle to the bagel bin to the coffee beans to the fresh fish market, exclaiming at all the new things. Many of us felt elevated, graced, complimented by the presence of this food palace in our town.

This is the wonderful egalitarianism of American business. Was it Andy Warhol who said that the nice thing about Coke is, no can is any better or worse than any other? Some people may find it dull to cross the country and find the same chain stores with the same merchandise from coast to coast, but it means that my town is as good as yours, my shopping mall as important as yours, equally filled with wonders.

Imagine what people ate during the winter as little as seventy-five years ago. They ate food that was local, long-lasting, and dull, like acorn squash, turnips, and cabbage. Walk into an American supermarket in February and the world lies before you: grapes, melons, artichokes, fennel, lettuce, peppers, pistachios, dates, even strawberries, to say nothing of ice cream. Have you ever considered what a triumph of civilization it is to be able to buy a pound of chicken livers? If you lived on a farm and had to kill a chicken when you wanted to eat one, you wouldn't ever accumulate a pound of chicken livers.

Another wonder of Middletown is Caldor, the discount department store. Here is man's plenty: tennis racquets, panty hose, luggage, glassware, records, toothpaste. Timex watches, Cadbury's chocolate, corn poppers, hair dryers, warm-up suits, car wax, light bulbs, television sets. All good quality at low prices with exchanges cheerfully made on defective goods. There are worse rules to live by. I feel good about America whenever I walk into this store, which is almost every mid-winter Sunday afternoon, when life elsewhere has closed down. I go to Caldor the way English people go to pubs: out of sociability. To get away from my house. To widen my horizons. For culture's sake. Caldor provides me too with a welcome sense of seasonal change. When the first outdoor grills and lawn furniture appear there, it's as exciting a sign of spring as the first crocus or robin.

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Someone told me about a Soviet émigré who practices English by declaiming, at random, sentences that catch his fancy. One of his favorites is, "Fifty percent off all items today only." Refugees from Communist countries appreciate our supermarkets and discount department stores for the wonders they are. An Eastern European scientist visiting Middletown wept when she first saw the meat counter at Waldbaum's. On the other hand, before her year in America was up, her pleasure turned sour. She wanted everything she saw. Her approach to consumer goods was insufficiently abstract, too materialistic. We Americans are beyond a simple, possessive materialism. We're used to abundance and the possibility of possessing things. The things, and the possibility of possessing them, will still be there next week, next year. So today we can walk the aisles calmly.

It is a misunderstanding of the American retail store to think we go there necessarily to buy. Some of us shop. There's a difference. Shopping has many purposes, the least interesting of which is to acquire new articles. We shop to cheer ourselves up. We shop to practice decision-making. We shop to be useful and productive members of our class and society. We shop to remind ourselves how much is available to us. We shop to remind ourselves how much is to be striven for. We shop to assert our superiority to the material objects that spread themselves before us.

Shopping's function as a form of therapy is widely appreciated. You don't really need, let's say, another sweater. You need the feeling of power that comes with buying or not buying it. You need the feeling that someone wants something you have—even if it's just your money. To get the benefit of shopping, you needn't actually purchase the sweater, any more than you have to marry every man you flirt with. In fact, window-shopping, like flirting, can be more rewarding, the same high without the distressing commitment, the material encumbrance. The purest form of shopping is provided by garage sales. A connoisseur goes out with no goal in mind, open to whatever may come his or her way, secure that it will cost very little. Minimum expense, maximum experience. Perfect shopping.

I try to think of the opposite, a kind of shopping in which the object is all-important, the pleasure of shopping at a minimum. For example, the purchase of blue jeans. I buy new blue jeans as seldom as possible because the experience is so humiliating. For every pair that looks good on me, fifteen look grotesque. But even shopping for blue jeans at Bob's Surplus on Main Street—no frills, bare-bones shopping—is an event in the life of the spirit. Once again I have to come to terms with the fact that I will never look good in Levi's. Much as I want to be mainstream, I never will be.

In fact, I'm doubly an oddball, neither Misses nor Junior, but Misses Petite. I look in the mirror, I acknowledge the disparity between myself and the ideal, I resign myself to making the best of it: I will buy the Lee's Misses Petite. Shopping is a time of reflection, assessment, spiritual self-discipline.

It is appropriate, I think, that Bob's Surplus has a communal dressing room. I used to shop only in places where I could count on a private dressing room with

a mirror inside. My impulse then was to hide my weaknesses. Now I believe in sharing them. There are other women in the dressing room at Bob's Surplus trying on blue jeans who look as bad as I do. We take comfort from one another. Sometimes a woman will ask me which of two items looks better. I always give a definite answer. It's the least I can do. I figure we are all in this together, and I emerge from the dressing room not only with a new pair of jeans but with a renewed sense of belonging to a human community.

When a Solzhenitsyn<sup>1</sup> rants about American materialism, I have to look at my digital Timex and check what year this is. Materialism? Like conformism, a hot moral issue of the fifties, but not now. How to spread the goods, maybe. Whether the goods are the Good, no. Solzhenitsyn, like the visiting scientist who wept at the beauty of Waldbaum's meat counter but came to covet everything she saw, takes American materialism too materialistically. He doesn't see its spiritual side. Caldor, Waldbaum's, Bob's Surplus—these, perhaps, are our cathedrals.

## Questions

1. Read once again the title of the essay. What assumption underlies the title? If, as Rose says, Caldor, Waldbaum's, and Bob's Surplus were the "cathedrals" (para. 11) of her time—the 1980s—what are our "cathedrals" now? Consider the impact of online shopping. How has that phenomenon changed the economic landscape that Rose describes?
2. How does Rose go about undermining our conventional attitudes concerning materialism? Does she consider Americans to be too materialistic? Explain.
3. How does Rose characterize buying and shopping in paragraphs 6 and 7? Do you agree with her?
4. How does Rose's use of analogy and self-characterization appeal to her audience? How does it contribute to her argument?
5. Writing in 1984, Rose saw materialism and conformism as issues from the 1950s, already dated thirty years in the past; now, another thirty years later, to what extent does Rose speak to the economic issues of our time?

## 4. Waste

WENDELL BERRY

In the following essay from his 1990 collection, *What Are People For?*, Wendell Berry discusses the waste that we produce as a result of production and consumption.

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<sup>1</sup>Russian author Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (1918–2008) gave a famous commencement address at Harvard University in 1978, in which he warned of the moral and spiritual dangers of having a national ethos based primarily on material gain.—Eds.

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develops. How effectively does she use them to support her claim about Schor? Explain with specific references to both articles.

3. Smith refers to Ralph Nader and Paul Hawken (paras. 14–15). What is the purpose for each reference? Which one more effectively supports her argument?
4. How does Smith respond to Schor's idea of a new luxury tax? Explain.
5. What do you consider Smith's most compelling claim? Do you agree with her? Explain.

## 7. *In Praise of Chain Stores*

VIRGINIA POSTREL

In the following essay from the December 2006 issue of the *Atlantic*, Virginia Postrel discusses the advantages of chain stores.

Every well-traveled cosmopolite knows that America is mind-numbingly monotonous—"the most boring country to tour, because everywhere looks like everywhere else," as the columnist Thomas Friedman once told Charlie Rose. Boston has the same stores as Denver, which has the same stores as Charlotte or Seattle or Chicago. We live in a "Stepford world," says Rachel Dresbeck, the author of *Insiders' Guide to Portland, Oregon*. Even Boston's historic Faneuil Hall, she complains, is "dominated by the Gap, Anthropologie, Starbucks, and all the other usual suspects. Why go anywhere? Every place looks the same." This complaint is more than the old worry, dating back to the 1920s, that the big guys are putting Mom and Pop out of business. Today's critics focus less on what isn't there—Mom and Pop—than on what is. Faneuil Hall actually has plenty of locally owned businesses, from the Geoclassics store selling minerals and jewelry, to Pizzeria Regina ("since 1926"). But you do find the same chains everywhere.

The suburbs are the worst. Take Chandler, Arizona, just south of Phoenix. At Chandler Fashion Center, the area's big shopping mall, you'll find P. F. Chang's, California Pizza Kitchen, Chipotle Mexican Grill, and the Cheesecake Factory. Drive along Chandler's straight, flat boulevards, and you'll see Bed Bath & Beyond and Linens-n-Things; Barnes & Noble and Borders; PetSmart and Petco; Circuit City and Best Buy; Lowe's and Home Depot; CVS and Walgreens. Chandler has the Apple Store and Pottery Barn, the Gap and Ann Taylor, Banana Republic and DSW, and, of course, Target and Wal-Mart, Starbucks and McDonald's. For people allergic to brands, Chandler must be hell—even without the 110-degree days.

One of the fastest-growing cities in the country, Chandler is definitely the kind of place urbanists have in mind as they intone, "When every place looks the same, there is no such thing as place anymore." Like so many towns in America, it has lost much of its historic character as a farming community. The annual Ostrich Festival still honors one traditional product, but these days Chandler raises more subdivisions and strip malls than ostrich plumes or cotton, another former staple. Yet it still refutes the common assertion that national chains are a blight on the

landscape, that they've turned American towns into an indistinguishable "geography of nowhere."

The first thing you notice in Chandler is that, as a broad empirical claim, the cliché that "everywhere looks like everywhere else" is obvious nonsense. Chandler's land and air and foliage are peculiar to the desert Southwest. The people dress differently. Even the cookie-cutter housing developments, with their xeriscaping<sup>1</sup> and washed-out desert palette, remind you where you are. Forget New England clapboard, Carolina columns, or yellow Texas brick. In the intense sun of Chandler, the red-tile roofs common in California turn a pale, pale pink.

Stores don't give places their character. Terrain and weather and culture do. Familiar retailers may take some of the discovery out of travel—to the consternation of journalists looking for obvious local color—but by holding some of the commercial background constant, chains make it easier to discern the real differences that define a place: the way, for instance, that people in Chandler come out to enjoy the summer twilight, when the sky glows purple and the dry air cools.

Besides, the idea that America was once filled with wildly varied business establishments is largely a myth. Big cities could, and still can, support more retail niches than small towns. And in a less competitive national market, there was certainly more variation in business efficiency—in prices, service, and merchandise quality. But the range of retailing *ideas* in any given town was rarely that great. One deli or diner or lunch counter or cafeteria was pretty much like every other one. A hardware store was a hardware store, a pharmacy a pharmacy. Before it became a ubiquitous part of urban life, Starbucks was, in most American cities, a radically new idea.

Chains do more than bargain down prices from suppliers or divide fixed costs across a lot of units. They rapidly spread economic discovery—the scarce and costly knowledge of what retail concepts and operational innovations actually work. That knowledge can be gained only through the expensive and time-consuming process of trial and error. Expecting each town to independently invent every new business is a prescription for real monotony, at least for the locals. Chains make a large range of choices available in more places. They increase local variety, even as they reduce the differences from place to place. People who mostly stay put get to have experiences once available only to frequent travelers, and this loss of exclusivity is one reason why frequent travelers are the ones who complain. When Borders was a unique Ann Arbor institution, people in places like Chandler—or, for that matter, Philadelphia and Los Angeles—didn't have much in the way of bookstores. Back in 1986, when California Pizza Kitchen was an innovative local restaurant about to open its second location, food writers at the L.A. *Daily News* declared it "the kind of place every neighborhood should have." So what's wrong if the country has 158 neighborhood CPKs instead of one or two?

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<sup>1</sup>Landscaping designed to minimize water consumption.—Eds.

The process of multiplication is particularly important for fast-growing towns like Chandler, where rollouts of established stores allow retail variety to expand as fast as the growing population can support new businesses. I heard the same refrain in Chandler that I've heard in similar boomburbs elsewhere, and for similar reasons. "It's got all the advantages of a small town, in terms of being friendly, but it's got all the things of a big town," says Scott Stephens, who moved from Manhattan Beach, California, in 1998 to work for Motorola. Chains let people in a city of 250,000 enjoy retail amenities once available only in a huge metropolitan center. At the same time, familiar establishments make it easier for people to make a home in a new place. When Nissan recently moved its headquarters from Southern California to Tennessee, an unusually high percentage of its Los Angeles-area employees accepted the transfer. "The fact that Starbucks are everywhere helps make moving a lot easier these days," a rueful Greg Whitney, vice president of business development for the Los Angeles County Economic Development Corporation, told the *Los Angeles Times* reporter John O'Dell. Orth Hedrick, a Nissan product manager, decided he could stay with the job he loved when he turned off the interstate near Nashville and realized, "You could really be Anywhere, U.S.A. There's a great big regional shopping mall, and most of the stores and restaurants are the same ones we see in California. Yet a few miles away you're in downtown, and there's lots of local color, too."

Contrary to the rhetoric of bored cosmopolites, most cities don't exist primarily to please tourists. The children toddling through the Chandler mall hugging their soft Build-A-Bear animals are no less delighted because kids can also build a bear in Memphis or St. Louis. For them, this isn't tourism; it's life—the experiences that create the memories from which the meaning of a place arises over time. Among Chandler's most charming sights are the business-casual dads joining their wives and kids for lunch in the mall food court. The food isn't the point, let alone whether it's from Subway or Dairy Queen. The restaurants merely provide the props and setting for the family time. When those kids grow up, they'll remember the food court as happily as an older generation recalls the diners and motels of Route 66—not because of the businesses' innate appeal but because of the memories they evoke.

The contempt for chains represents a brand-obsessed view of place, as if store names were all that mattered to a city's character. For many critics, the name on the store really *is* all that matters. The planning consultant Robert Gibbs works with cities that want to revive their downtowns, and he also helps developers find space for retailers. To his frustration, he finds that many cities actually turn away national chains, preferring a moribund downtown that seems authentically local. But, he says, the same local activists who oppose chains "want specialty retail that sells exactly what the chains sell—the same price, the same fit, the same qualities, the same sizes, the same brands, even." You can show people pictures of a Pottery Barn with nothing but the name changed, he says, and they'll love the store. So downtown stores stay empty, or sell low-value tourist items like candles and kites,



while the chains open on the edge of town. In the name of urbanism, officials and activists in cities like Ann Arbor and Fort Collins, Colorado, are driving business to the suburbs. “If people like shopping at the Banana Republic or the Gap, if that’s your market—or Payless Shoes—why not?” says an exasperated Gibbs. “Why not sell the goods and services people want?”

### Questions

1. Do you agree with the characterization of America with which Postrel begins her essay? Why or why not?
2. According to Postrel in paragraph 7, what are the main things that chain stores do? Do her claims square with your own observations and experience? Explain.
3. What are the economic effects of chains, according to Postrel?
4. Postrel quotes Orth Hedrick, a Nissan product manager: “You could really be Anywhere, U.S.A. There’s a great big regional shopping mall, and most of the stores and restaurants are the same ones we see in California. Yet a few miles away you’re in downtown, and there’s lots of local color, too” (para. 8). What is Hedrick’s tone? Rewrite the third sentence to give the speaker an entirely different tone and attitude toward chains.
5. What does Postrel imply about people who are against chain stores?

## 8. *Forbes Price Index of Luxury Goods Keeps Pace with Inflation*

SCOTT DECARLO

The following chart is excerpted from one posted on the *Forbes* magazine Web site on September 23, 2010. *Forbes* is a business bi-weekly that is famous for its lists, such as “The Forbes 400,” which identifies the richest Americans.

ITEM	2010 PRICE	CHANGE FROM 2009
Coat/Natural Russian sable, Maximilian at Bloomingdale’s	\$200,000	14%
Silk Dress/Bill Blass Ltd., classic	\$1,900	–21%
Loafers/Gucci	\$495	0%
Shirts/1 dozen cotton, bespoke, Turnbull & Asser, London	\$4,200	0%
Shoes/Men’s black calf wing tip, custom-made, John Lobb, London	\$4,187	–11%
School/Preparatory, Groton, 1-year tuition, room, board	\$48,895	4%
University/Harvard, 1-year tuition, room, board, insurance	\$50,723	4%

<b>Opera</b> /Two tickets, six performances Metropolitan Opera, Saturday night, parterre box	\$4,265	-3%
<b>Caviar</b> /Imperial Special Reserve Stellatus, 1 kilo, Petrossian, Los Angeles, CA & N.Y., N.Y.	\$19,600	NA
<b>Champagne</b> /Dom Perignon vintage 2000, case, Sherry-Lehmann, N.Y.	\$1,799	0%
<b>Dinner at La Tour d'Argent*</b> /Paris, estimated per person (including wine and tip)	\$426	-15%
<b>Flowers in season</b> /Arrangements for 6 rooms, changed weekly, Christatos & Koster, N.Y., per month	\$8,175	0%
<b>Hotel</b> /1-bedroom suite, Four Seasons, N.Y.	\$4,650	0%
<b>Face-lift</b> /American Academy of Facial Plastic & Reconstructive Surgery	\$17,000	0%
<b>Lawyer</b> /Established N.Y. firm, Schlesinger, Gannon & Lazetera LLP, average hourly fee for estate planning by partner	\$875	3%
<b>Perfume</b> /1 oz. Joy, by Jean Patou	\$450	13%
<b>Motor yacht</b> /Hatteras 80 MY (with 1,550hp Caterpillar C-32 engines)	\$5,281,600	0%
<b>Shotguns*</b> /Pair of James Purdey & Sons (12 gauge Side-by-Side), Griffin & Howe, Bernardsville, NJ & Greenwich, CT	\$185,954	-1%
<b>Swimming pool</b> /Olympic (50 meters), Mission Pools, Escondido, CA	\$1,476,000	-5%
<b>Tennis court</b> /Clay, Putnam, Tennis and Recreation, Harwinton, CT	\$55,000	0%
<b>Automobile</b> /Rolls-Royce Phantom	\$380,000	0%
<b>Magazine</b> /Forbes, 1-year subscription	\$60	0%
<b>Duffel Bag</b> /Louis Vuitton, Keepall Bandouliere, 55 centimeters	\$1,225	0%
<b>Watch</b> /Patek Philippe classic men's in gold (Calatrava), alligator strap	\$17,400	NA
<b>Purse</b> /Hermes, Kelly Bag, calfskin, rigid, 28 centimeters	\$7,300	NA

\*Currency exchange as of Aug. 31, 2010.

## Questions

1. Which item on the list is the most surprising to you? Which is the least? Why?
2. Which items on the list are within the grasp of the majority of consumers? Which are completely out of range? What do you consider luxuries in your own life? How do they compare with those on the list?
3. In his *Philosophical Dictionary* (1764), the French author Voltaire wrote, "People have declaimed against luxury for two thousand years, in verse and in prose, and people have always delighted in it." Do more people declaim or delight in luxury? Which do you find yourself doing more? How does this chart affect your view of luxury? Of wealth? Of consumerism and materialism? Of the economy? Refer to Voltaire's epigrammatic statement in your response.



4. Do you think people should pay more in taxes — pay what we call a “luxury tax” — on purchases of items such as those on this list? Why or why not?

## Making Connections

1. In her essay “In Praise of Chain Stores,” Virginia Postrel quotes consultant Robert Gibbs: “‘If people like shopping at the Banana Republic or the Gap, if that’s your market — or Payless Shoes — why not?’ says an exasperated Gibbs. ‘Why not sell the goods and services people want?’” (para. 10). How would Wendell Berry reply to Gibbs’s question? Juliet Schor? John Kenneth Galbraith? Henry David Thoreau? Joan Smith? Provide a brief response of a sentence or two for each.
2. How might Thoreau, Berry, Galbraith, Schor, Smith, Phyllis Rose, or Postrel respond to the *Forbes* Price Index of Luxury Goods? Write a one- to two-sentence response from each.
3. Why are the words “necessities” and “liberations” in quotation marks in “Waste” by Berry? How would Thoreau regard Berry’s use of “necessities”? How would Rose regard his use of “liberations”? Explain.
4. Compare Schor’s concluding rhetorical question with Galbraith’s main idea. How would he answer her question?
5. Thoreau describes luxuries and “comforts” as “hinderances to the elevation of mankind” (para. 4). Rose sees the “spiritual side of shopping” and views it as a “time of reflection, assessment, spiritual self-discipline” (para. 9). Imagine a brief dialogue between the two writers. What would each say?
6. How would Rose respond to Smith’s argument?
7. Smith remarks, “The most compelling reason to buy these new things is not the status they afford but their promise to make life easier and/or more fun” (para. 11). Which of the writers in this Conversation would agree? Which would disagree? Why? Do you agree?
8. Compare what Postrel says in paragraph 9 with the main ideas in the piece by Rose (p. 482).

## Entering the Conversation

As you respond to the following prompts, support your argument with references to at least three sources in this Conversation on materialism in American culture. For help using sources, see Chapter 4.