

# Holiday Consumerism: Who Decides What “Nobody Really Needs?”

“Wasting resources, capital and income on stuff nobody really needs,” Charles Hugh Smith wrote in 2017, “is a monumental disaster on multiple fronts. Rather than establish incentives to conserve and invest wisely, our system glorifies waste and the destruction of income and capital, as if burning time, capital, resources and wealth on stuff nobody needs is strengthening the economy.”

I come across the “stuff nobody needs” argument frequently, from voices all across the political spectrum, for reasons ranging from economic to environmental to spiritual.

I also notice that in the featured portrait on Smith’s blog, he’s holding what appears to be a pretty sweet Gibson Les Paul electric guitar.

Does anyone “really need” an electric guitar?

Presumably Smith believes he needs one. Maybe even an authentic Les Paul. Maybe even more than one guitar (like the Fender Stratocaster or clone thereof pictured elsewhere on his site).

And who has the right to veto his judgment on the issue, so long as the “resources, capital and income” he’s “wasting” on it are his own?

I settled for an inexpensive Epiphone model of the Les Paul for my own, perhaps larger than justifiable, guitar collection (my wife frowned at the price tag of the genuine Gibson).

I wouldn’t dream of claiming that my “need” for a Les Paul is more urgent than, say, a starving child’s need for a hot meal or a homeless person’s need for shelter.

On the other hand, my purchase of that guitar helped create paychecks that put meals in bellies and roofs over heads.

Economic demands are mutually self-fulfilling. Your purchase of a cup of fancy coffee puts caffeine in your bloodstream and money in the pockets of those who brought it to you — money they can spend fulfilling THEIR needs.

The same thing goes for planes, trains, automobiles, electric guitars, and the latest slice-it, dice-it, cook-it contraptions you (yes, I know it’s you) buy after watching those cheesy infomercials.

Yes, large-scale consumer economies produce negative “externalities” such as

environmental damage.

Yes, those externalities are bad things which a more just economic system would build back into prices so as to discourage “over-consumption” and/or encourage more efficient and less damaging production techniques.

Current economic systems, including all state regulatory schemes, be they called “capitalist,” or “socialist,” or some hybrid, tend to subsidize those externalities. You pay for them with your taxes, whether you actually buy the subsidized goods or not.

That being the case, there’s no reason to feel guilty for buying this year’s “frivolous” holiday gifts that “nobody really needs.” Not because holiday shopping “strengthens the economy,” but because you want to give them and the recipients want to get them.

PS: Santa, bring me a Gretsch, please.