
earth rights

Martin Stott on a journey into the 'dark heart of American consumerism' and an exploration of alternatives

the story of stuff



About three years ago, a short, low-budget animation was loaded on the internet. Only 20 minutes long, it could have languished in cyberspace unnoticed for years. It didn't. Indeed, quite the opposite happened. What its producer and narrator, Annie Leonard, had hoped would be a useful intervention in the debate in America on the nature and direction of their consumer society became a lot more than that. In fact, three years and over 7 million internet viewings of the film later, Leonard is now regularly designated as an 'internet sensation' and has the dubious accolade of being denounced regularly on right-wing talk-shows as an enemy of the American way of life – most notably by Glenn Beck, who has nicknamed her 'The Marxist in the Pony Tail'.

This very accessible little film (available at www.thestoryofstuff.com) takes a journey into the 'dark heart of American consumerism', and in a hard-hitting but amusing way takes it apart and explores just how there could be another way. No wonder Glenn Beck and other cheerleaders for the current model of American capitalism don't like it.

Well, there is bad news for them and good news for the rest of us. The book of the film has now been published.¹ Running to 400 pages, this is hardly a slight strip-cartoon magazine. The little stick people and their props pop up all over the place by way of illustration, but this is a much more serious contribution.

Just as accessible as the film, this closely-argued and hard-hitting book combines autobiography, polemic, hard-headed analysis and relevant policy proposals. Leonard, an activist and campaigner for decades, particularly on waste issues, illustrates what the sub-title of the book describes as 'how our obsession with stuff is trashing the planet, our communities and our health' from her own experience and possessions – like her computer, on which she no doubt wrote the book. I recall the cheerleaders of the e-revolution a decade or so ago

arguing in books with titles such as *Living on Thin Air* that the new information society would lead us to the promised land. Unfortunately, Leonard points out that it's been squandered already by 'between 5 million and 7 million tons of electronics becoming obsolete each year, their trashed toxic components poisoning the land, air, water and all of the Earth's inhabitants' – or as she puts it 'e-waste is a global nightmare'. The debate as to what each chip is made up of and how it's fabricated and disposed of is quite an eye-opener.

The deployment of statistics is quite mind-boggling and at times utterly terrifying. All statements are minutely documented, with hundreds of references for each chapter. But it's the stuff on the American (and the UK's) love affair with shopping that will make you weep – sometimes with laughter. I'd forgotten that in the wake of the 9/11 tragedy George W. Bush had urged Americans to go shopping as the 'ultimate repudiation of terrorism'. Really. So anyone who suggests that consuming less might not be a bad thing is quite literally threatening the American way of life.

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Even those consumer advocates who campaign for fair-trade chocolate or organic cotton clothing, aren't actually asking the question: Are we consuming too much? 'I am learning it is not a popular question,' Leonard remarks ruefully.

The book, like the film, sets out the whole cycle of extraction, production, consumption and disposal across the planet – in what Leonard calls 'the take-make-waste economic model'. Apart from pithy insights into the American (and European) obsession with stuff and what we do with it when

we no longer want it, there are some really heart-breaking stories about labour exploitation and toxic dumping in Haiti and the disaster that the cavalier disregard for life in the cause of industrial production gave rise to in Bhopal, India. Leonard has direct experience of working in both places, and her personal connections lend an urgency and credibility to the stories she tells.

Fortunately, it's not all doom and gloom. Her policy prescriptions (there is a whole annex of 'promising policies, reforms and laws') are credible and grounded in reality. For example, Leonard makes a powerful case for the importance of universal healthcare in the US as an environmental gain. How so? Because 'currently many people who would like to work can't for fear of losing health benefits' – and because 'if people don't need to work full-time to get health benefits, many will choose to work fewer hours and earn less and will therefore buy and trash less stuff and have more time to engage in community and civic activities that help the planet'. Universal healthcare in the US hasn't been achieved since the book was written, but some pretty big steps forward have been made.

I'll stick my neck out and say that this is the kind of contribution to sustainable development thinking and action that we've been waiting for – grounded, serious, challenging, accessible, funny, and an inspiring call to arms. In other circumstances I'd say go out and buy this book, but I'm sure the author will understand if I recommend that instead you insist your local library orders a copy.

● **Martin Stott** is Head of Environment & Resources at Warwickshire County Council. The views expressed here are personal.

Note

- 1 Annie Leonard: *The Story of Stuff. How our Obsession with Stuff is Trashing the Planet, our Communities, and our Health – and a Vision for Change.* Constable & Robinson, 2010 (£9.99, PB)

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