

The Affluent Society John Kenneth Galbraith

Unlocking the Secrets of Affluence: A Deep Dive into Galbraith's "The Affluent Society" Hey everyone, welcome back! Today we're diving deep into a truly fascinating book that continues to resonate with our modern world: John Kenneth Galbraith's "The Affluent Society." Galbraith, the renowned economist, challenged the conventional wisdom of the post-war economic boom, arguing that our priorities and spending habits needed a serious rethink. Let's unpack this seminal work, exploring its core ideas and their relevance today. **to the Affluent Society** "The Affluent Society," published in 1958, wasn't just an economic analysis; it was a societal critique. Galbraith argued that the post-war American boom, while creating material wealth, wasn't necessarily leading to a better society. He challenged the prevailing notion that economic growth was the ultimate goal, highlighting the disconnect between our desires and the needs of society. His work foresaw a future where consumerism threatened to overshadow social progress.

The Myth of the Self-Regulating Market: A Critical Lens

The Problem of Advertising and Consumerism

Galbraith brilliantly argued that advertising wasn't simply about informing consumers; it was about creating desires. He termed this process "creating wants" – a powerful, manipulative force that fuels consumption even when basic

needs are met. He believed that the incessant barrage of advertisements created a culture where individuals were constantly pursuing desires crafted by marketers, rather than prioritizing genuine needs.

Case Study: The auto industry post-World War II. Galbraith noted how manufacturers, through advertising, fueled demand for bigger, faster cars, diverting resources away from other areas of societal need, such as infrastructure and education.

The Neglect of Public Goods

A key argument in the book is the prioritization of private consumption over public investment. Galbraith pointed out that our resources often get funneled into private goods, leading to neglect of public goods like infrastructure, education, and social programs. This created a vicious cycle, where private wealth didn't translate to societal well-being.

Example: Compare spending on military versus education. Galbraith argued that the military-industrial complex, a focus of much later debate, was a perfect example of how resources could be allocated to a private good at the expense of public needs, ultimately hindering societal advancement.

The Implications for Modern Society

The Importance of Public Investment

Galbraith emphasized that a truly affluent society wasn't just about material wealth; it was about the collective well-being of its citizens. This translates to prioritizing public goods, such as robust social safety nets, quality education, and sustainable infrastructure.

Chart: A comparison of GDP growth against social well-being indicators like life expectancy, literacy rates, and poverty levels across different countries illustrates how prioritizing public welfare yields better long-term societal

outcomes than prioritizing pure economic growth.

Shifting Priorities: From Consumption to Well-being

Galbraith's core message is about re-evaluating our priorities. Instead of focusing solely on accumulating possessions, we should strive for a broader concept of well-being that includes social cohesion, community development, and environmental sustainability.

Practical Example: The rise of social enterprises and businesses that prioritize social and environmental impact over pure profit maximization exemplifies a shift towards Galbraith's idea of prioritizing societal well-being alongside profit.

Critique and Relevance Today

While "The Affluent Society" was written decades ago, its core arguments remain relevant. The rise of global inequality, the environmental crisis, and the persistence of social issues highlight the need for a more holistic approach to progress. Galbraith's work provides a valuable framework for understanding how to navigate these complex challenges.

Key Benefits of Galbraith's Perspective (Explained)

- *A Holistic Approach to Progress:* Moving beyond a narrow focus on economic growth to encompass societal well-being.
- *Critical Examination of Consumerism:* Understanding the manipulative nature of advertising and the need for a more mindful approach to consumption.
- Prioritizing Public Goods: Recognizing the crucial role of investments in education, infrastructure, and social safety nets in fostering a truly affluent society.
- *Rethinking Economic Priorities:* Shifting from a focus on private consumption to a focus on collective

well-being and sustainable development. • *Promoting Social Cohesion:*
Understanding the interplay between individual needs and societal well-being, leading to more robust and just societies.

Expert-Level FAQs

1. How does Galbraith's concept of "creating wants" relate to modern marketing strategies? 2. **What are the practical implications of Galbraith's argument for policymakers in today's globalized world?** 3. **How does "The Affluent Society" compare with other critiques of consumerism and capitalism?** 4. Can Galbraith's ideas be applied to developing nations facing economic and social challenges? 5. **What are the potential downsides of prioritizing public goods over private sector initiatives?** **Conclusion** "The Affluent Society" offers a powerful challenge to our assumptions about progress and prosperity. By critically examining our consumption patterns and prioritizing societal needs, we can move towards a more sustainable and fulfilling future. Galbraith's work encourages a paradigm shift, prompting us to question the prevailing values and actively strive for a more equitable and well-rounded society. Until next time, keep thinking critically, and keep questioning the status quo.

The Affluent Society: John Kenneth Galbraith's Enduring Critique of Modern Wealth

John Kenneth Galbraith's *The Affluent Society*, published in 1958, was more than just an economic treatise; it was a cultural lightning rod, a sophisticated dissection of post-war American prosperity that challenged prevailing assumptions about progress, happiness, and the very definition of a good society. In an era characterized by unprecedented economic growth, a burgeoning middle class, and a seemingly insatiable appetite for consumer

goods, Galbraith dared to ask: are we truly as well-off as we think we are? This seminal work, a cornerstone of 20th-century economic thought, continues to resonate today. Its insights into the dynamics of production, consumption, and the role of advertising are as relevant in our age of information overload and perpetual new product cycles as they were in the age of the automobile and the television. Galbraith, a renowned economist and public intellectual, didn't just present data; he wove a compelling narrative, rich with wit and incisive observation, that exposed the often-unseen forces shaping our desires and our economic landscape. ### The Post-War Boom and the Conventional Wisdom Galbraith's starting point was the remarkable economic transformation of the United States after World War II. The war effort had stimulated industrial production, and the subsequent decades saw a dramatic increase in wealth and material abundance. The prevailing narrative, often referred to as the "conventional wisdom," celebrated this growth as the ultimate triumph of capitalism. More production, more consumption, more wealth – this was the seemingly unassailable equation for societal progress. However, Galbraith was not content with this simplistic outlook. He argued that this conventional wisdom, while superficially appealing, was fundamentally flawed. It focused solely on the quantitative aspects of economic growth – the sheer volume of goods and services produced – and neglected the qualitative aspects of human well-being. He observed that while the private sector was awash in resources, the public sector – the realm of public goods and services – was starved. ### The Dependence Effect: Manufacturing Desire One of the most enduring and controversial concepts introduced in *The Affluent Society* is the "dependence effect." Galbraith argued that in an affluent society, the producers of goods and services don't simply respond to existing consumer demand; they actively *create* that demand. Through sophisticated advertising, marketing, and public relations, businesses generate new desires, transforming what might have once been considered wants into perceived needs. Think about it: how many of the products you own today were genuinely conceived of as essential before they appeared on the market? Galbraith would argue that many were not. Instead, they were the result of a carefully orchestrated campaign to convince consumers that they *needed* these items to be happy, modern, or successful.

This created a cycle where production led to the manufacturing of desire, which in turn fueled further production. This dependence effect had profound implications. It meant that the economic system was not necessarily geared towards fulfilling genuine human needs, but rather towards perpetuating itself through continuous growth and consumption. It also raised questions about individual autonomy – how much of our decision-making is truly our own, and how much is influenced by external forces? ### The Contrast Between Private Affluence and Public Squalor Perhaps the most striking dichotomy Galbraith identified was the stark contrast between the affluence of the private sector and the "squalor" of the public sector. While individuals and families enjoyed an ever-increasing array of consumer goods, the nation's infrastructure, public services, and social programs lagged far behind. Galbraith painted vivid pictures of this disparity: gleaming new automobiles sharing roads riddled with potholes, well-appointed private homes overlooking neglected public parks, and families with abundant personal possessions struggling with inadequate public schools and healthcare. He argued that this imbalance was a direct consequence of the prevailing economic priorities, which favored private consumption over public investment. The conventional wisdom, preoccupied with maximizing private output, often viewed public spending as a drain on the economy. Galbraith, however, argued the opposite. He contended that investment in public goods and services was essential for a truly flourishing society. These were the things that benefited everyone, not just a select few, and were crucial for a healthy and productive populace. ### The Decline of the "General Will" and the Rise of Special Interests Another key theme in *The Affluent Society* is the erosion of the "general will" – the idea that the collective needs and desires of society should guide economic and political decisions. Galbraith argued that in an affluent society, the voice of the consumer, or rather, the manufactured consumer, often drowned out the genuine needs of the less affluent and the broader societal good. He observed that powerful special interest groups, often representing industries with vested interests in maintaining high levels of production and consumption, wielded significant influence. These groups could lobby governments, shape public opinion through advertising, and ensure that policies were tailored to their benefit, often at the

expense of broader social objectives. The book also touched upon the concept of ***countervailing power,*** an idea Galbraith would further develop in later works. He suggested that in certain situations, large concentrations of economic power could be checked by the emergence of equally powerful countervailing forces, such as strong labor unions or consumer advocacy groups. However, he also acknowledged that this power was not always evenly distributed and that imbalances persisted. ### Implications for the Future and Beyond *The Affluent Society* was a wake-up call, a sophisticated critique that forced readers to reconsider their assumptions about progress and prosperity. Galbraith didn't advocate for a return to scarcity; rather, he called for a more balanced and considered approach to economic development. He urged society to think beyond the endless pursuit of material goods and to prioritize investments in education, healthcare, environmental protection, and other public goods that contribute to a higher quality of life for all. His insights into the role of advertising and the manufactured nature of desire remain profoundly relevant in today's hyper-consumerist culture. The endless stream of new gadgets, fashion trends, and lifestyle fads can be seen as a direct descendant of the forces Galbraith described decades ago. Furthermore, his observations about the disconnect between private wealth and public well-being continue to spark debate. Issues of income inequality, underfunded public services, and the environmental consequences of unchecked consumption are all echoes of the concerns Galbraith raised. ### Legacy and Relevance Today John Kenneth Galbraith's *The Affluent Society* is more than just a historical document; it's a living critique. Its enduring legacy lies in its ability to make us question the underlying assumptions of our economic system and our pursuit of happiness. It encourages us to consider: * ***What truly constitutes a good life?*** Is it simply the accumulation of material possessions, or does it involve something more? * **How do we balance private interests with the public good?*** Can we achieve genuine societal progress without investing in our collective well-being? * **What is the true power of advertising and marketing?*** How much are our desires shaped by external forces? In a world still grappling with economic disparities, environmental challenges, and the relentless pressure to consume, Galbraith's message remains a vital and necessary one. *The Affluent Society* is

a powerful reminder that true affluence is not just about what we own, but about the quality of our lives, the strength of our communities, and the health of our planet. It challenges us to move beyond the conventional wisdom and to strive for a society that is not only prosperous but also truly good. Galbraith's work, including this masterpiece, has inspired generations of economists, sociologists, and engaged citizens to think critically about the world around them. His ability to distill complex economic concepts into accessible and engaging prose makes *The Affluent Society* a must-read for anyone interested in understanding the forces that shape our modern world and the ongoing quest for a more just and equitable society. The **economic theories** he presented continue to be debated and analyzed, underscoring the lasting impact of his intellectual contributions. The concept of **social welfare** is inextricably linked to his critique of unbalanced economic growth. His **economic analysis** offers a timeless perspective on the challenges of **post-war prosperity** and its implications for the future.

Understanding the Affluent Society: Insights from John Kenneth Galbraith

John Kenneth Galbraith's seminal work, *The Affluent Society*, published in 1958, remains a profound critique of postwar American economic life and continues to resonate deeply in contemporary discussions about wealth, consumption, and societal well-being. More than a mere economic analysis, Galbraith's book challenges the assumption that rising national income necessarily translates into widespread prosperity or meaningful quality of life. Through a keen lens on consumer culture and market dynamics, he reveals a society caught between material abundance and unmet human needs, offering timeless wisdom on progress and prosperity.

The Core Challenge: Wealth Without Well-Being

At the heart of Galbraith's argument lies a striking paradox: while the United States experienced unprecedented economic growth after World War II, marked by soaring GDP and rising corporate profits, many citizens felt increasingly deprived of genuine social and environmental well-being. He observed that the affluent society—though materially rich—often prioritized production over people, directing vast resources toward consumer goods while neglecting essential public goods like infrastructure, education, and healthcare. This imbalance, Galbraith argued, reflected a fundamental misalignment between economic success and human flourishing. He warned that unchecked consumerism could erode community values and perpetuate inequality, even within a nation of abundance.

Key Insights: The Myth of Material Sufficiency

Galbraith's analysis dismantles the myth that material wealth alone defines societal health. He introduced the concept of “conventional wisdom”—the prevailing beliefs accepted without question—to expose how public discourse often celebrated consumption as a measure of progress. Yet, he insisted, true prosperity must account for the full spectrum of human needs: emotional security, social connection, civic engagement, and environmental sustainability. His critique extended to corporate power and advertising, which he argued shaped desires not based on genuine need but on manufactured wants, fueling a cycle of overproduction and overconsumption that strained both individuals and the planet.

Applications in Modern Contexts

Galbraith's insights remain strikingly relevant in today's globalized economy, where consumer culture continues to expand and markets increasingly influence

identity and self-worth. In an era defined by digital marketing, social media influence, and fast fashion, his warning against equating economic growth with societal progress urges a reevaluation of success metrics. Policymakers, educators, and business leaders can draw from his work to prioritize investments in public welfare, sustainable development, and inclusive growth. By recognizing that affluence is not simply about wealth accumulation but about equitable access to opportunity and dignity, societies can foster environments where prosperity serves people, not just profits.

Benefits of Embracing Galbraith's Vision

Adopting a Galbraithian perspective offers profound benefits for both individuals and communities. It encourages a shift from passive consumption to intentional living, promoting mindful choices that enhance personal fulfillment and collective resilience. For organizations, this means embracing corporate social responsibility not as a peripheral activity but as a core value, aligning business practices with long-term societal health. On a broader scale, integrating his insights supports the creation of policies that balance economic expansion with social and environmental stewardship, cultivating sustainable and equitable futures.

Future Outlook: Reimagining Affluence

Looking ahead, Galbraith's vision invites a transformative reimagining of affluence—one rooted in holistic well-being rather than mere financial metrics. As climate change, inequality, and digital disruption reshape global priorities, his call for a society that values people over profit becomes ever more urgent. The future lies in fostering economies that measure success not only by GDP but by health outcomes, community strength, and environmental sustainability. By embracing Galbraith's critical lens, societies can build resilient, inclusive systems where true prosperity uplifts all, ensuring that wealth truly serves the common good.

The Affluent Society: John Kenneth Galbraith's Enduring Critique of Modern Capitalism

John Kenneth Galbraith's seminal work, "The Affluent Society," published in 1958, remains a cornerstone of economic and social critique. More than half a century later, its insights into the paradox of wealth and poverty, the influence of advertising, and the limitations of conventional economic thinking resonate powerfully. This article delves into Galbraith's central arguments, explores its historical context, and analyzes its enduring relevance in the 21st century, offering an SEO-friendly exploration for those interested in economic theory, social commentary, and the challenges of modern prosperity.

The Paradox of Private Affluence and Public Squalor

The core thesis of "The Affluent Society" is encapsulated in its most famous paradox: the stark contrast between the overflowing abundance in the private sector and the decaying infrastructure and underfunded public services. Galbraith observed that in post-World War II America, consumers were bombarded with endless choices and persuasive advertising, fueling a relentless demand for new goods and services. While this generated immense private wealth and satisfaction, the public sphere was neglected. Roads crumbled, schools were understaffed and ill-equipped, and environmental

degradation was widespread. This disparity, Galbraith argued, was not accidental but a direct consequence of the prevailing economic and social priorities.

The Role of Wants and the "Dependence Effect"

A key element of Galbraith's critique is his examination of how wants are created and satisfied. He challenged the traditional economic assumption that wants are inherent and pre-exist their satisfaction. Instead, he introduced the concept of the "dependence effect," arguing that in an affluent society, advertising and marketing actively create desires that did not previously exist. This continuous generation of wants, often artificial, serves to justify the production of more goods, perpetuating a cycle of consumption. He famously stated, "The notion that wants are urgent, that their satisfaction is the primary goal of the economic system, is itself a product of the system." This insight is crucial for understanding consumerism and its impact on our values.

The Conventional Wisdom Under Scrutiny

Galbraith was a sharp critic of what he termed "conventional wisdom" – the widely accepted economic theories and beliefs that often fail to account for the realities of a maturing industrial economy. He argued that economists, bound by outdated theories, struggled to grasp the new dynamics of the affluent society. The focus on maximizing production and consumption, he contended, obscured the growing problems of inequality and the underprovision of public goods. He advocated for a revision of economic thinking to acknowledge the importance of social balance and the need for public investment.

The Influence of Advertising and Marketing

Galbraith placed significant emphasis on the power of advertising and marketing in shaping consumer behavior and, consequently, the direction of the economy. He argued that the primary function of advertising in an affluent society is not to inform but to persuade and to create new desires. This is particularly true for goods that are not essential for survival or basic well-being. The relentless barrage of advertisements, he observed, creates a sense of urgency and inadequacy, driving individuals to constantly seek more possessions. This perspective remains highly relevant in today's digitally saturated world, where targeted advertising and influencer marketing are pervasive.

The Imperatives of Production

Related to the dependence effect is Galbraith's concept of the "imperatives of production." He argued that large corporations, driven by the need to maintain stable demand and predictable profits, actively cultivate these artificial wants. The success of these corporations, and by extension, the health of the economy as perceived by conventional wisdom, becomes intrinsically linked to the continuous stimulation of consumption. This creates a powerful feedback loop where production dictates consumption, rather than the other way around.

The Case for Public Investment and Social Balance

Despite his critical stance on consumerism, Galbraith was not an anti-growth ideologue. Instead, he argued for a reorientation of economic priorities. He believed that the surplus generated by an affluent society should be channeled into improving the quality of life through robust public services and investments.

This includes education, healthcare, infrastructure, and environmental protection. His concept of "social balance" highlights the need for equilibrium between the production of private goods and the provision of public services. When private affluence outstrips public capacity, the overall quality of life suffers, even for the wealthy.

The Decline of the Urgency of Wants

Galbraith posited that as basic needs are met, the "urgency" of wants diminishes. Yet, the economic system, driven by the imperatives of production, continues to generate and promote new wants as if they were urgent. This creates a situation where resources are allocated to satisfying less pressing, often superficial, desires while critical public needs go unmet. The contrast between a dazzling array of consumer electronics and underfunded public schools is a stark illustration of this imbalance.

Historical Context and Enduring Relevance

"The Affluent Society" emerged during a period of unprecedented economic growth in the United States. The post-war boom led to rising incomes and a burgeoning middle class, creating a society with more disposable income than ever before. However, Galbraith's keen observations cut through the prevailing optimism, pointing to the underlying structural issues and potential downsides of this newfound prosperity. He was a dissenting voice, questioning the unquestioned faith in perpetual economic growth as the ultimate measure of societal well-being.

"The Affluent Society" in the 21st Century

The relevance of "The Affluent Society" in the 21st century is undeniable. We live in a world of unparalleled consumer choice, fueled by sophisticated

marketing and the constant drive for novelty. The digital age has amplified the power of advertising, making it more personalized and pervasive than ever. Furthermore, the challenges of climate change, income inequality, and underfunded public services are pressing issues that echo Galbraith's concerns. His critique of the dependence effect helps us understand the drivers of overconsumption and its environmental consequences. The call for social balance remains a crucial reminder that true societal progress requires more than just private wealth; it demands a healthy and well-functioning public realm.

Beyond Conventional Economics

Galbraith's work continues to challenge mainstream economic thinking. His emphasis on the social and psychological dimensions of economic behavior, his critique of unchecked corporate power, and his advocacy for a more equitable distribution of resources offer valuable perspectives for those seeking alternative economic models. He reminds us that economics is not just about numbers and models but about human well-being and the kind of society we wish to build. For students of economics, sociology, and public policy, "The Affluent Society" remains an essential read, offering timeless insights into the complexities of modern capitalism and the pursuit of a truly affluent and just society.

In conclusion, John Kenneth Galbraith's "The Affluent Society" is more than just an economic treatise; it is a profound social commentary that continues to shape our understanding of prosperity, consumption, and the role of government. Its enduring critique of private affluence and public squalor, the manipulative power of advertising, and the limitations of conventional economic wisdom provides a vital framework for analyzing the challenges and opportunities of the modern world. By revisiting Galbraith's arguments, we can gain a deeper appreciation for the true meaning of societal well-being and the steps necessary to achieve it.

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Critical analysis is strengthened through exposure to diverse sources. Digital access allows learners to compare multiple perspectives, evaluate arguments, and assess the credibility of information. Engaging with *The Affluent Society* John Kenneth Galbraith alongside related works encourages independent thinking and informed judgment, essential skills in both academic and professional contexts.

For students, digital books provide practical advantages that support academic success. Downloadable materials allow for offline study, exam preparation, and revision without constant internet access. Annotation tools help students organize notes and highlight key concepts, improving study efficiency and comprehension.

Professionals also benefit from the convenience and immediacy of digital resources. Downloading *The Affluent Society* John Kenneth Galbraith allows professionals to reference relevant information quickly, update their knowledge, and support ongoing skill development. In fast-changing industries, access to up-to-date information is essential for maintaining competence and competitiveness.

Digital organization further enhances the value of downloadable books. Users can categorize files, create searchable libraries, and back up content using cloud storage solutions. This organization ensures that valuable learning materials remain accessible and easy to manage over time, supporting long-

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As technology continues to advance, self-directed learning will become increasingly important. The ability to download *The Affluent Society* John Kenneth Galbraith reflects an adaptive approach to education that aligns with modern learning environments. Digital literacy is now a core competency for learners at all levels.

In summary, downloading *The Affluent Society* John Kenneth Galbraith illustrates the transformative impact of technology on self-directed education. Through portability, convenience, interactivity, and ethical access, digital resources empower learners to take control of their educational journeys. Responsible and informed use of digital platforms enables users to fully

leverage The Affluent Society John Kenneth Galbraith for personal enrichment, academic achievement, and professional development in the digital age.

Questions & Answers About the affluent society john kenneth galbraith

No	Question	Answer
1	What is John Kenneth Galbraith's central argument in 'The Affluent Society'?	Galbraith's core argument is that post-WWII American society had achieved unprecedented material wealth, but this affluence had not translated into a corresponding increase in well-being. He argued that private wants were over-satisfied while public needs (like education, infrastructure, and social services) were neglected due to market forces prioritizing private consumption.
2	What does Galbraith mean by the 'conventional wisdom' he criticizes?	The 'conventional wisdom' refers to the widely accepted beliefs and assumptions about economics and society that Galbraith found to be outdated and inadequate for understanding affluent society. He argued these beliefs, often rooted in classical economic thought, failed to account for the unique challenges and characteristics of a society with abundant production.
3	How does Galbraith explain the creation of 'manufactured wants'?	Galbraith introduced the concept of the 'dependence effect,' where advertising and marketing create demand for products rather than simply responding to existing consumer desires. He argued that in an affluent society, the production of goods becomes so efficient that companies must actively persuade consumers they need these goods, thus manufacturing wants.

4	What is the distinction Galbraith draws between 'private wants' and 'public needs'?	He differentiates between private wants, which are readily satisfied by the market (e.g., consumer goods, entertainment), and public needs, which are often unmet and underfunded (e.g., clean air and water, public transportation, education). Galbraith contended that affluent society's focus on private consumption led to a neglect of these essential collective goods.
5	Why is 'The Affluent Society' still relevant today, decades after its publication?	The book's critiques of consumerism, advertising's influence, and the underfunding of public services remain highly relevant. Many of the societal imbalances Galbraith identified, such as wealth inequality and the prioritization of private profit over public well-being, are still pressing issues in contemporary societies.
6	What were some of the proposed solutions or implications of Galbraith's work?	Galbraith advocated for a shift in societal priorities, suggesting increased public investment in education, infrastructure, and social programs. He also called for a more critical examination of the role of advertising and a greater emphasis on collective well-being over relentless private consumption.
7	How did 'The Affluent Society' challenge prevailing economic thought at the time?	The book was groundbreaking because it questioned the dominant neo-classical economic assumption that increased production automatically led to improved societal welfare. Galbraith argued that in an affluent society, the focus needed to shift from production to the allocation of resources, particularly towards public goods and services that contribute to a higher quality of life.

John Kenneth Galbraith affluent society analysis, Galbraith wealth inequality critique, affluent society economic theory John Kenneth Galbraith, Galbraith the affluently unequal society, John Kenneth Galbraith critique of affluence, affluent society and consumption patterns Galbraith, Galbraith on modern affluent society, affluence and economic distribution Galbraith, John Kenneth Galbraith and social inequality, Galbraith's vision of the affluent society

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