Mark Gonnerman: Good evening, and welcome to the Aurora Forum. I’m Mark Gonnerman, director of the Aurora Forum, and I’m pleased to welcome you to tonight’s program, part of the Education for Citizenship Series that we’re presenting with the McCoy Family Center for Ethics in Society. This series aims to generate critical inquiry into virtues and vices as forces relevant to such issues as education, civic engagement, democracy, and globalization.

Tonight, we focus on “Consuming Culture and Greed” with our guests David Loy and Juliet Schor. We’ll follow our typical format of 45 minutes of audience conversation after we speak for 45 minutes here on the stage. When we get to the point where we invite you to join in, please go to one of the aisle microphones and we’ll bring you into the mix.

Our topic tonight is timely for two very obvious reasons. First, we are all very much aware of the current economic recession. We’re concerned about how deep it will cut, and we want to know what we can do to address the difficulties we are all sure to face. Secondly, having just entered the month of December, we are having this conversation in the early days of the intensified ritual activities of home decorating, shopping, traveling, and gift exchanges that mark a month-long festival leading up to Christmas, the high holy day of what some would now call a post-modern religion of consumption. While for many, Christmas, the second-most important festival day in the Christian liturgical calendar, has lost its Christian significance, this does not necessarily mean that it has lost its religious meaning. Avatars of Santa Claus have returned and appear once again in shopping center shrines throughout the country, where thousands of children wait in line for an opportunity to express their deepest wishes for items they trust will magically appear under an evergreen tree that has been sacrificed and bedecked with lights and other ornaments. [Laughter] They and their parents sincerely hope that acquisition of these things will bring happiness, perhaps forgetting, as a friend of mine likes to say, “The best things in life are not things.”

Let me introduce our guests. Juliet Schor is a professor of sociology at Boston College. Before joining Boston College, she taught at Harvard University for seventeen years in the Department of Economics and the Committee on Degrees in Women’s Studies. Her latest book is Born to Buy: The Commercialized Child and the New Consumer Culture.

David Loy recently moved from the faculty of International Studies at Bunkyo University in Japan to Xavier University in Ohio, where he is the Besl Professor of Ethics/Religion & Society. His field of study is comparative philosophy and religion, especially the relationship between Buddhist teachings and contemporary social issues. His books include *A Buddhist History of the West*, *Lack and Transcendence*, *The Great Awakening*, and *Money, Sex, War, Karma: Notes for a Buddhist Revolution*. A student and practitioner of Zen Buddhism for many years, he is a qualified teacher in the Sanbo Kyodan lineage. His 1997 article, “The Religion of the Market,” sparked an ongoing discussion about the nature of consumer capitalism which, he claims, is “the first truly world religion binding all corners of the globe more and more tightly into a world view and set of values whose religious role we overlook only because we insist upon seeing them as secular.” Juliet has also written, at the end of *The Overspent American*, that we are now living in a world where making as much money as possible has become the reigning religion.

I want to begin, David, asking you what you mean by consumer capitalism as the world’s first truly global religion.

**David Loy:** Well, of course, it all depends on what you mean by religion. I think it’s interesting that scholars of religion have never been able to come up with a satisfactory definition that everyone can agree to. If you look at religion functionally – in other words, if you look at religion as that which teaches us what the world really is, what’s most important about it, and therefore the kind of values we should have in relation to how we live in the world – then I think it makes sense that consumer capitalism for more people today is playing that role, certainly six days a week, if not seven. And not only that, I think it’s quite arguably the most successful religion of all time, winning more converts more quickly than any religion ever has before.

**Gonnerman:** You speak as a Buddhist philosopher, I understand, and you have talked about how we institutionalize what Buddhists talk about as three poisons, three things that influence our behavior in ways that aren’t very positive. That’s ill will, that’s greed, and that’s delusion. And you’ve said that we’ve institutionalized these so that delusion is institutionalized in the mass media, ill will in militarization, and greed in the economic system. Can you explain that? How is greed institutionalized in the economic system?

**Loy:** Well, what is greed? I think from the Buddhist definition, you would understand it as a very good example of *tanha*, of the kind of craving that is never satisfied. And if you look at our economic system, I think you can see it operating in at least two ways. One way is in terms of corporate profits and corporate growth. By definition, the
corporation or the GNP is never big enough; there’s always the desire for more profitability, more market share. But it’s also true, obviously, on the consumer side as well that the system works by continuing to persuade us that it’s the next thing that we consume that will make us happy. And it’s very important, of course, in that system that we never actually get there.

**Gonnerman:** Juliet, you’ve thought a lot about this, too – this insatiability factor and how people are motivated always, it seems, to participate in what you call a cycle of work and spend. What is that cycle of work and spend?

**Schor:** If you think about the core dynamics of a capitalist or market economy, one of the important things is that we have continual productivity growth, which means that we can produce any given amount of output using fewer hours of labor. Annually, productivity goes up, and we’re faced with a choice: Do we work the same amount and produce more, or do we decide that we have enough and reduce working hours? What the cycle of work and spend says is that we are continually taking the first choice, which is not reducing hours of work but using productivity growth to produce more output. That output then gets channeled into the population. Now, historically, more of it went to workers, and some of it goes to owners and some of it goes to workers. Recently, workers haven’t gotten very much of their productivity growth, but in the post-World War II era, we basically had a lot of that productivity growth getting channeled into workers’ incomes, and then it got spent. The cycle has to do with people’s attitudes toward this. If you ask workers whether they’d rather have more money or more free time, you have very high desires for more free time rather than more money. But once people get the money and spend it, they are very loath to go back to what they said they wanted in the prior era. So what happens is that this society continually is channeling productivity growth into output, output goes into income and spending, and people don’t necessarily feel better off year by year because everybody is spending together, and well-being in relationship to spending is a very relative thing.

**Gonnerman:** Is everyone caught in this cycle?

**Schor:** One of the groups I’ve studied is the down-shifters. There are both voluntary and involuntary down-shifters, but the voluntary down-shifters are people who are deliberately opting out of that cycle, choosing to work less and spend less and have less income, and that’s, I think, a growing movement in this country. Of course, the involuntary down-shifter population, people who are having this happen not by choice, is also considerable and, at the moment, growing quite rapidly.

**Gonnerman:** Let’s go to your op-ed on Friday since we’re talking about the current situation. What were you trying to get across?

**Schor:** Well, the op-ed started by saying we’ve got these two hungry beasts here, Black Friday and Cyber Monday, and it’s like they’ve shown up for dinner. They’re at the door and the consumer is inside, messy kitchen, toddler screaming, and the last thing the consumer needs right now is mandatory shopping, which is what these beasts are saying:
“Let me in.” These people can’t take on more debt. They feel overspent and tapped out. They understand they need to save, and yet we have an economy with a growth imperative and very little social imagination about how we can organize ourselves in a different way – how we could have economic life and social life and cultural and spiritual life that does not involve growth, because we’ve spent more than fifty years now in a society with a growth imperative, but what the op-ed said was people understand that has to stop. We need to find a different way now. And consumers, I think, understand that in a fundamental way that feels very different from any point in the past.

**Gonnerman:** David, from this point of view of consumer capitalism as a religion, what are some of the options for imagining another way of proceeding or participating in this?

**Loy:** In other words, what are the alternatives? That’s the $64,000 question, isn’t it? From the Buddhist perspective, if I could talk a little bit about that, what strikes me is what a very nice fit there is between consumer capitalism as it’s functioning now, in constantly persuading us to buy more, and what I would talk about as a sense of lack. According to Buddhism, the sense of self is really a construct, and being a construct, it’s ungrounded by definition. And I think that we experience this ungroundedness as something as a sense of lack, as a sense that there’s something wrong, something missing. And traditionally throughout human history, I think this is the origin of religion. I think this is one way of understanding why it is that humans become religious. This is the way that we respond to this sense of something wrong with ourselves. But I think what’s happened in the modern era, of course, is that we have discovered that we have this kind of economic system that keeps persuading us the problem is that what we’re lacking is material things, the things that we consume. The reason I’m going off in this direction is I think that a very important part of the answer might be an acknowledgment of the religious dimension of this – becoming more aware that there’s something driving us here that we don’t really understand, and part of the solution might well be a better understanding of what a religion can be and how it might be reformulated. So often, we have what I call “junk religion,” quite frankly, which is just encouraging us to identify with certain sorts of things. And I think if we emphasize that the religious path is really about personal transformation and also, therefore, collective social transformation, and we become more aware of the religious dimension of this, then maybe that will, in the long run, help us deal with the issue. That’s just one of many factors. I know that Juliet has talked about a number of other approaches that she thinks are more practical and more on the ground.

**Gonnerman:** We’ll get back to some of those alternatives, but at this point I’m interested in where these beasts that you talk about come from. How did we get to the point where they’re constantly knocking on the door?

**Schor:** Well, I think it’s an interesting moment to revisit that history, because it came out of the Great Depression. During the Great Depression, there was a very vibrant national debate about how to respond. On the one hand, there were people who were arguing: There is a limited amount of work available and what we should do is reduce working hours to create more jobs and sort of spread the work around. The country came
this close [gestures] to having a thirty-hour-a-week bill through the Congress. Roosevelt changed his mind about that at the very last moment and it didn’t end up happening, and he went for a jobs program to create more government employment instead. The economists, on the other hand, were arguing that actually it would be possible to pump up consumer demand enough to keep everybody working at the same hours that they worked before the depression started. And the debate centered on how much consumer desire was out there, because in the twenties, the economy became so productive. With all the shift to mass production, productivity soared. And the thirties were a demand failure; consumer demand wasn’t high enough. And there was a very widespread belief that once people had what they needed, they wouldn’t keep purchasing. Now, we laugh today, but it was a very real fear. And in the end, the war got us out of the depression, but at the end of the war, there was very widespread concern that we would sink back into depression because the demand wouldn’t be there. And so there were whole series of things that were done at the policy level, at the ideological and cultural level, on the advertising side, and so forth, to get people to keep buying. We call it the growth imperative, but it got sort of built into the system at that point and it got very ritualized and kind of embedded into the system. And the idea of responding to an economic crisis or to an ecological crisis or to a social crisis by not growing so rapidly, by reducing hours of work, by getting the balance between the market and the rest of our world back – those alternatives pretty much fell off the table. So I think that is probably the most important point of departure that led us to where we are today.

Gonnerman: And then what about the role of media in keeping it going – this ongoing mass delusion? You’ve been researching advertising agencies, Juliet, and you’ve been thinking a lot about this, David.

Loy: Well, I think it’s quite striking today, isn’t it, given how much time all of us spend one way or another embedded in the media with screens or whatever. It’s really obvious now, I think, that the media have become our national, if not international, nervous system. And yet, of course, their primary function isn’t to inform us. They are mega-corporations, and they don’t make money by giving us news; they make their money through advertising. So it’s essential to that process – this basic collective nervous system – that it’s going to be using whatever infotainment or product they’re providing as a way to encourage us to keep shopping. So now it’s really built into our collective spine, which is a pretty scary thought.

Gonnerman: Well, you’ve just researched how children are indoctrinated into this. It’s shocking, really, in a way, in reading your book, how pervasive and strategic advertising agencies are in encountering children in all aspects of their lives.

Schor: They call it 360-degree marketing touch points. Their aim is to be in a child’s life 24/7, at all moments. What we used to call Madison Avenue (I know that’s a generationally specific term now, because they’re everywhere – not just on one street in Manhattan), the advertising and marketing industries have found children in a big way. And that’s relatively new and it’s happened in large part because children have money and also control parental and grandparental money in ways – large purchasing power.
It’s influenced by children, and they are one of the most important areas, if not the most important area, in advertising over the last two decades, I would say. What’s happened is that kids have been really trained now from the very earliest ages to be brand conscious and to be consumers, and that the consuming identity is so fundamental to American youth in a way that, I think, is much more insidious and pervasive than in earlier generations.

Loy: If it’s true, as I was saying, that the sense of self is still developing and then more and more of this consumerist attitude is built into the structure and that sense of self from an earlier and earlier age, it is probably that much more successful and also that much more difficult to overcome.

Schor: Part of the research for that book [Born to Buy] involved doing some work in social psychology where I measured how involved in consumer culture children were and then looked at their psychological well-being. And what I found is that the kids who were more involved in consumer culture had worse psychological outcomes. They’re more likely to be depressed, more likely to be anxious, lower self-esteem, more likely to fight with their parents, more likely to have psychosomatic illnesses like headaches, stomachaches, boredom. And I think this point about sense of self is really key. It goes to a Buddhist thing, which is, I think, the core that has to do with dissatisfaction and the dissatisfaction that’s created through high levels of media and consumer involvement. That’s what I found: the kids who had more media exposure — and that leads to higher consumer involvement — are much more likely to think that they don’t have enough: they want more, that their parents don’t understand them and how much they need, that other kids have more than they do, they don’t like the car they have, they wish their parents earned more money, and so forth. So it’s that fundamental lack of feeling okay about who you are that gets disrupted, I think, with excessive consumer involvement.

Gonnerman: You also wrote about the way in which schools themselves have been infiltrated through strategies that make use of textbooks. Let’s talk about the schools and what’s happening there with market values entering into the very curriculum.

Schor: Yes, very heavy infiltration of corporations into schools through enlisting teachers to be their “brand ambassadors,” they call them, through corporate-written curricula. We had a whole era in which environmental curricula in this country was being written by Exxon and Mobil and the nuclear industry and some chemical industries – just pervasive sending out of these very expensive, sophisticated curricula. And as schools don’t have money to do their own curriculum work, more and more teachers were turning to these corporate curricula. One of the other programs I wrote about, which really gets to the heart of learning, I think, is a program like Pizza Hut’s book-reading program. There’s all this pressure to read, read, read, so kids are rewarded for the number of books they read and they get more pizza the more books they read. It encourages an instrumental relationship to reading. So what you find is that the kids read faster and faster and read more and more books, but they don’t know what they’re reading. They read for the reward rather than for the intrinsic love of reading, so there’s a fundamental undermining of the reading experience as something that’s intrinsically so
important for kids to get. And there’s a sense in which all of education has become instrumental. It’s a means to a job, it’s a means to money, and that sort of instrumentalization and commercialization and commoditization of education all the way through, including at the university level, is something that’s happening, and I think it’s really something to worry about.

**Loy:** It’s also true of the consumer products that have become instrumentalized as status symbols or as ways to compare oneself with other people. We were talking about this earlier and how it is that you could say that the basic problem today isn’t that we’re too materialistic but that in some ways we’re not materialistic enough – that we’re using these products and for us, they become symbols of how it is that we relate ourselves and compare ourselves with other people. And rather than actually being able to fully enjoy the materiality of a particular … for example, a glass of wine. How often do we really become one with a glass of wine and appreciate the subtleties and the sensuousness, and how often are we aware of how much this very expensive glass of wine costs and what it says about us as discriminating wine consumers? From a Buddhist perspective, too, I’m not saying that we should become less materialistic. In some ways, I’d like us to become more so – more appreciative of the sensuous world.

**Gonnerman:** So are you saying there’s a difference between the price of something and its value, and to become more materialistic is to value more the material world?

**Loy:** Well, there’s the old saying: We know the price of everything and the value of nothing. In a way, you could understand this as the meaning of the Midas story. I think that’s a wonderful Greek myth. If you really think about what’s going on there, everything Midas touched turned to gold. Well, in a sense, I think there’s a little bit of Midas in all of us, given that we live in such a monetarized society where we’re so completely dependent on money. But there’s a sense in which we’re encouraged to be so aware of the monetary value of particular things that we’re not able to fully appreciate what they are in themselves. It’s exactly this ends-means reversal that I think we’re so often attracted to.

**Gonnerman:** So are you suggesting that there’s a good practice of consumption?

**Schor:** Well, I believe there is. It gets to this point about not materialistic enough. I think it’s that the sort of standard formulation that we care about consumer things too much or we’re too oriented to them and that we’re supposed to orient to something else: a spiritual alternative or a non-consumer alternative. I think it’s getting it wrong. The problem is what the goods mean. Status, for example. Too much of what we’re doing is expressing the wrong or a bad set of values. Status consumption is expressing, I think, a not good set of values through what we consume. I would like to see us consume in ways that actually express the set of values that we say we have. And I think if we did that, if we wouldn’t be less consumer-oriented in some sense, we would be different kinds of consumers. We would care about the impacts of our consumer goods on the earth, for example, so we would keep things longer. We might care more about what we wear and not less. The average American is now purchasing seventy new pieces of apparel a year
… seventy! And we are throwing them out at an incredible rate and we’re shipping them abroad and we’re destroying indigenous apparel producers in Africa because all these cheap American cast-offs are going there. The problem isn’t that we need to stop caring about what we wear; we need to care more about it in the sense that we don’t buy things that we only wear once. Many of my students say they buy things they only wear once and then they pitch them. I know probably no one in this room does that. When I think about what kind of apparel consumers we should be, I’m not saying that people should care less about how they look or the kind of clothes they wear, but I think we need to invest more into our clothes, in a certain sense: keep them longer, care more about them, think more before we purchase something. I like to say we should think about our clothes like pets. You think carefully before you bring it into the house, you care for it well, if you decide that you need to separate, you find a good home for it. That’s a nice relationship to have with a material good. It took a lot of the earth’s resources and human labor to produce that good. Care about it.

**Loy:** Can I give an example? I lived in Japan for a long time, and as we all know, the Japanese tend to live in very small places because it’s such a crowded society, and the average Japanese person has a very small wardrobe in relation to ours, but they would be very high quality. They would choose their clothes very carefully. They would often be very expensive, but they would just have a few things. That’s all they had room for, and then they would really appreciate and take good care of them.

**Schor:** That’s an example of being more materialistic in the sense of really taking the materiality more seriously. It’s a much more ecologically sustainable consumer model. It’s not one that says you are superficial if you care about clothes. I don’t believe that. That’s a common thing you hear from consumer critics, but it’s not true. People have cared about what they wear for all of human history. What we wear is really important; it says a lot about who we are. So what are the things we want to say through what we buy to put on our bodies? Those are the kinds of consumer questions, I think, we can ask. We can see it really easily in food. Consumer critics never say, Oh, you shouldn’t eat food. It’s all about, Let’s have a slow food movement, let’s have a local food movement, let’s get pleasure back in our food, let’s not destroy the earth with our food, let’s create more conviviality and sociability with our food, and so on. But the same thing can be true of other consumer goods. They’re just like food, too, I think.

**Gonnerman:** So, do you sense that we’re at a time where what you’ve just said is making sense to more and more people, or do you sense that when you say something like this, everyone thinks it’s a good idea but doesn’t quite know how to make a transition to greater concern with quality and longevity and so forth?

**Schor:** Right now, the idea of more expensive things is difficult. We’re in a period of economic and financial collapse and scarcity. So that part of it – the part that says our consumer goods are going to be more expensive, they have to be, and that a sustainable society requires that – I think that’s a little bit harder. What I think people can hear is a different kind of consumer, more frugality, certainly. I think there are big changes going on among American consumers right now, moving away from what I call the fast-fashion
model, which predominated in the last decade or decade and a half of lots and lots of cheap imports – that apparel model I was talking about. That’s happening in many, many products. It’s happening in furniture and glassware and tchotkes and electronics and you name it. Lots of acquisition and lots of discard. I think we’re going to move away from that. Eventually, I think, we’ll get to a model – that more Japanese or European model – of fewer, higher-quality things. Right now, high prices are going to be a little bit tough.

Gonnerman: Did you bring your crystal ball tonight? How do you see things playing out in the next year or two with the economy?

Schor: Well, I think we’re in for a tough road. I think it’s going to be a more prolonged and deeper downturn than anything we’ve seen in many decades, and obviously that’s a pretty common view. What I do think is happening on the consumer culture side is that people are experiencing the current moment as one that is saying to them: The way we were living was unsustainable. I’m really impressed, and this is mostly through anecdotal information, but I’m really impressed by what consumers are saying. They’re saying that what we’ve just come through was financially unsustainable. They understand that it was unsustainable at the household level and at the government level. I think they understand also it’s been ecologically unsustainable and our role in the world has been unsustainable. So I feel hopeful about the possibilities of this moment leading to some really major change in the consumer culture.

Loy: At least there’s this possibility. Who was it who said, “A crisis is a terrible thing to waste”?

Gonnerman: Exactly, and it goes to this point that you made earlier about human imaginative capacities – the ability to see a situation and think that things could be otherwise. And it seems like that has been a problem all along with the consumer society: an inability to imagine…. It’s been naturalized; we’ve just come to accept that this is the way things are. So let’s exercise our imaginations a bit. We don’t want to waste this crisis. What are some things that might happen, that people could do, to make the changes that are necessary?

Loy: Well, just preliminarily, let’s just make the point that what works against this opening, I think, is the kind of fear-mongering that we’ve experienced, just as we experienced it after 9/11. So it was very clear when this crisis first happened and Lehman collapsed, Paulson goes to the Congress and this incredibly expensive package is passed, basically playing on our fear. And, of course, the scary thing is fear itself. Insofar as we get caught up in that fear, then we’re not open to the other kinds of possibilities that present themselves, and that’s the real challenge.

Gonnerman: What are some of the possibilities? We’ve been watching people look ahead and make changes already, and we hope that when we get to the time for the audience participation, if there are some people here who saw this coming and have been changing their way of life, they can talk about living more simply. What is some of the good news?
Schor: Well, for a little over ten years, I’ve been involved with an organization I co-founded called The Center for a New American Dream, which is devoted to making changes in lifestyles to make them more socially and ecologically sustainable. So we have been part of this sort of alternative emergent movement of different consumer patterns or different lifestyles. It’s a combination of things. I think at the core it goes back to what I was talking about earlier, which is getting out of work-and-spend: working fewer hours in the market, earning less, and buying less in the consumer market. That’s the “less” part of it. What’s the “more” part of it? These are people who are discovering more community, more connection with nature, more DIY (that is, do it yourself), so they’re learning a lot of skills, some of which are leisure skills. I’ve got to mention the great Stanford economist, Tibor Scitovsky, who talked about this many years ago: the idea that to really consume well, you need skills. And these down-shifters are learning. They’re investing a lot of time and effort in learning how to do things rather than a more spectator sport or a consumer model, in which you don’t need a lot of learning or skills to appreciate things. You can go to Disney World without training for it, but you can’t play an instrument unless you study. Then, also, skills of actual self-provisioning—learning how to garden and brew beer and can and do a lot of the things that allow you to get by with less income but actually make you a cook. There’s a big increase in cooking going on in the United States. Other people are moving even farther into this kind of new lifestyles with sharing models, whether it’s car sharing or co-housing (New York is getting its first co-housing development; the Times wrote about that last week), or actual planning. There’s a whole network of post-carbon towns and transition towns. There’s a lot going on. California and the Pacific Northwest are places very much in the vanguard of this. So there is definitely a movement out there that is saying: It’s time to live a different way. At the core of it is a commitment to ecological sustainability, but that has meant something much broader. Bioneers are a great example of this kind of thing.

Loy: The other thing you didn’t mention explicitly, but I think is implied by what you said, is the importance of encouraging relationships. Especially when you talk about skills, you often need a great diversity of skills in a community where people therefore are going to be sharing more. And to some extent, this is my sense of the trade-off, because consumerism as we have bought into it tends to encourage individualism and competition, whereas a reduction in that, which is very likely in the future, hopefully will encourage what a lot of psychologists emphasize is much more of the key to happiness, which is relationships with family, with friends—that that’s really what makes people happier. That will have to be built in, and I think it will naturally be built in to the kind of transformations that we’re going to see.

Gonnerman: And perhaps it will bring back apprenticeship models of education. That’s been a great loss, actually, in many vocational and other fields.

Let’s open up to audience participation. I’d love to hear from some of the Bioneers who can talk about what they’re doing.
Loy: It doesn’t need to be a question. It could be a comment and just add to the discussion.

Gonnerman: And I know we have people here tonight from the voluntary simplicity movement, and we’re very interested in hearing your stories and strategies.

Question from the Audience: I’ll just share a frustration that I have with you that’s related to what you were saying about clothing and accumulation of items. I agree with you 100 percent, but you’ll find that if you go into a nice boutique – say you’re shopping for a purse or something like that in Stanford Shopping Center, which is very upscale – you’re paying much, much more, and everything in the boutique is still made in China. So what you’re paying for doesn’t go to support a social system or a social safety net, and I interpret that as just increased profits for the corporations. So it’s not as easy as just making that choice, because when you go out looking for those items that have elements of couture in them and you’re saying, “I’m going to buy a nice jacket that I’m going to wear for ten years, and I’m not going to have twenty jackets for the same amount of money,” they’re not there. They’re just not there right now.

Schor: Well, yes, but if you look on the Internet, you will find the growth of an ethical and ecological apparel segment. I know it’s not always easy to buy on-line, and if you live in certain places, you’ll have access to these kinds of stores. Actually, I would say that in the last five years, that segment has grown quite substantially. This may not be an easy town to find it in, but maybe if you go to Berkeley. [Laughter] I know on the East Coast some of the places… I don’t know. Some of the more counter-cultural spots are beginning to actually also have boutiques. We have in Boston now on Newbury Street, which is probably equivalent to your Stanford mall in terms of price points, we have an ecological clothing store that’s opened. So it’s starting a little bit. I agree that most people can’t just walk down to the local mall and find it, but it’s a market niche that is growing.

Loy: But I think, too, that you’re making a more general point that’s very important that we really haven’t touched on. When we’ve been talking about consumerism, we’ve been talking about the end point and how much it is that we tend to buy too much, and so forth. But you’re making the point that intelligent consumerism needs to take account of the whole chain of production and that this is an essential part of it, and I think that’s right. I’m sure I’m not the only one here in the auditorium who is drinking fair trade coffee. I think this has to be built into it – an awareness of all of the other issues that are affecting the product that we are finally buying and consuming.

Schor: Just one more point to say that one of the things I’m trying to work on is to figure out how to get consumers like you hooked up with other people to put pressure on the suppliers to have those sorts of things. We’ve seen it in the food space, where you have a well-organized movement. They’re in constant battle with Whole Foods, for example, pushing them to do this and really moving the companies and moving the industry. We
don’t have that yet in apparel or in electronics or in other areas, but it’s also trying to mobilize consumers to make demands on the retailers and the manufacturers to give us these things that we want.

**Question from the Audience:** To me, the conversation is covering a very broad ground between transforming the way people live or see themselves on the one hand, and on the other hand just buying somewhat less. Getting by on fifty items of clothing per year instead of seventy doesn’t change your psychology, but it certainly affects the earth, as does buying cars with fewer bells and whistles or not buying as much. Twenty percent is not a big transformation in yourself, but it has a big impact on the world, and that would be seemingly much simpler. And the idea that you spend more time doing other things, like spending time with friends rather than shopping, is the change. And if you spend the same amount shopping because you’re judging the quality of the cloth and picking out something really fine, you’re still in the store, you’re still in the mall or whatever it is maybe the same amount of time as you would be buying a huge amount of stuff. So you wouldn’t have the time with a friend if you’re spending the time studying the clothes very carefully [Laughter] and comparing one tailor with another. So I’m not quite clear what it is that is going on.

At the same time, this consumerism has been around for a really long time. It’s just that the number of people who had enough wealth to participate was limited, and people who wore one thing and threw it away existed hundreds of years ago. They had the dress made for the ball and a hundred seamstresses working on it for hours, and then they wore it to one ball and that was it. But that was a small fraction of the population that could do that, but the value was still there, and as people got more and more wealth it was taken on by more and more people. So what do you think about just buying a little bit less, spending less time in the mall, rather than having great psychological and religious transformations? [Laughter]

**Loy:** Or maybe both.

**Schor:** Well, I guess a couple of things. One is that I think we actually have to reduce by more than 20 percent if we want to get to sustainability. The second is, part of what I want to say is that the problem is the kind of shopping we do. I don’t think shopping itself is the problem. Yes, of course, we need time for friends, and you don’t want anything out of balance. My Buddhist friend here, I’m sure…. I know very little about Buddhism, but moderation … that point of not excessive…

**Loy:** The middle path.

**Schor:** Yes. That’s important. But shopping, for example, and knowing how to shop and being a good shopper is actually a really important human activity, and the point of view that denigrates it, I think…. There’s a whole very problematic intellectual tradition, which feminist scholarship has rightly pointed the finger at and said, Hey, wait a second, this is a denigration of things that women have been doing for a very long time and a failure to value the critique of consumption, which says shopping is superficial or trivial
or it doesn’t have value, is partly a critique of what women have been doing. Now, we
can say we don’t like the kind of shopping we’re doing, but I value a person who can go
into a shop and knows about fabrics and can understand the difference between a garment
that is well made and one that is not. Those are valuable skills, and those are skills we’re
going to need more of as we face a world with more ecological constraints when we can’t
just throw out the garments that didn’t work, and so forth. I think we need to reclaim and
recover those skills because most people in the population know very little about that. So
I think becoming skilled, knowledgeable shoppers is actually something that’s really
important. That’s what I’m talking about: a different kind of consumer.

Gonnerman: When was home economics taken out of the schools?

Schor: Taken out of the schools? That’s probably the seventies or eighties. By that
point, I don’t think it was doing too much that was all that valuable. Earlier in the
century, I think it was actually imparting more serious skills to people.

Gonnerman: Are you suggesting it would be time to bring something like that back?

Schor: Could be.

Question from the Audience: Juliet, you mentioned two famous economists. I’m going
to go ahead and name another one. Muhammad Yunus was on campus a few weeks ago,
and he spoke about this need with the current economic crisis and all the world leaders
trying to find a way collectively to prevent this from recurring, to reincorporate the 2 or 3
billion people in the world who don’t have access to food, water, shelter, medication, and
so on, and say, Look, the economic system of the last sixty years – Bretton Woods and all
those sorts of things – have really been about the rich, the people who can afford stuff
rather than the 2 or 3 billion people who can’t. What about incorporating those who
can’t? I wonder if both of you can in fact build on that a little bit with what you’ve
mentioned today and say how we can reform the current economic system collectively
and also individually from an ecological point of view and in terms of building
relationships and all these sorts of things? What can we do?

Schor: Well, I think one of the key things, again, if we think about apparel, is to recover
domestic demand for apparel. Thinking about the place where Yunus comes from,
you’ve got many apparel workers in Bangladesh who produce garments that get shipped
to the rich countries, and they can’t afford to buy garments themselves. So that
rebuilding of the internal markets of places where there’s been degradation of purchasing
power and huge export orientation is really key. I think that in the regions of the world
that have large numbers of poor people, the solution lies in large part through much more
of a regionalization, back to more regionalized economies and building up domestic
purchasing power. Now, how we get there … complicated story. I think that for garment
industries, apparel industries, it’s got to be a gradual thing. We don’t want to cut off
access. Raising the wages of garment workers and eliminating that destructive
downward cycle of prices, which has degraded labor conditions around the world, is
certainly a key point. And that’s where U.S. consumers can have an impact by
demanding fair trade, not just in things like coffee and chocolate, and so forth, but by
basically insisting that the garments that they buy are made by people who get reasonable
wages that allow them to have good standards of living.

**Question from the Audience:** I have a positive observation. I live in this area and work
in this area. I’m a garden designer. I’ve been in the landscape field for thirty years
around here, so it’s a little bit of a rarified sample. This area just has too much money
floating around. But I’ve been sort of a tree hugger from the beginning, so I’ve been
going to conferences and hearing about how the movement’s been going for thirty years.
And this year, for the first time, every call I’ve gotten for a new design has been that
they’ve wanted sustainable, they followed through the whole design process with
sustainable, and they’re installing sustainable. So there’s hope, and it could happen to
clothing, too. It seems like people in the whole construction industry in general are
getting that way and it’s coming in through municipal legislation and things like that. So
there are things actually happening. With clothing, as you said, it’s about workers’
rights.

But you reminded me of when I first came to work in Menlo Park in the eighties, and
after a couple of years I realized that the reason people looked at me was because I had
long hair (I was kind of a hippie), but I shopped at secondhand stores in San Francisco
and commuted on down here. And everybody else was wearing this uniform they bought
at Macy’s. And I remember my clients talking about their kids getting so upset because
they wanted a certain brand, and how strange I thought it was in the seventies when I saw
the first label on the outside of a garment. [Laughter] It’s not good enough just to have a
nice shirt; it has to have the brand name on the outside so everybody knows that you’re
well-off enough to buy at the same store they did, or something like that.

That’s not a positive observation, but hopefully, if things get more expensive, and in
addition to the cost of labor, the true environmental costs begin to be built into the cost of
these items, they’ll get more expensive and people will value them more. So in a way
there is kind of a market solution along with those demands of the government. But I just
wonder… Obviously, I’m a good example of the kind of person who keeps his clothes
for a while. This one I stole from my brother on the East Coast. Some of these are
secondhand. My car is twenty-five, thirty years old. If everybody lived like me, our
economy would be hell. I wouldn’t have any clients. [Laughter] I depend on rich
people. I know you touched upon this earlier when you talked a little history (and I came
in a few minutes late, so pardon me if I missed it), but wouldn’t our economy go to hell if
people lived like I do?

**Schor:** Not necessarily. You have these examples of the western European countries
where you have large numbers of what are called post-materialists; that is, people who
have chosen this path of working less and earning less, so less consumerist, and they put
less demand into the economy. And those economies grew less rapidly, but they did very
well in terms of employment, productivity, competitiveness, and quality of life, and
basically doing the things that an economy is supposed to do for people, which is
providing for their standards of living and creating a good life and a good society. That’s
what we need the economy to do. So we can move in that direction. I think the key is that it happens in a more gradual way, so as people downshift, there are fewer hours supplied to the labor market, and as long as we get flexibility – flexibility in hours – we can do it. You’ve got to dampen down the profit expectations and the way that Wall Street works in relationship to non-financial corporations.

When you have an escalation of competition, there is a very psychological component to it. Why, all of a sudden, does Wall Street demand much higher profits and much more short-term profits? It’s just a cycle that gets put into place, and then once some start, everybody follows. And so you can also start to gradually unwind that. And the current crisis, of course, is a good moment to start doing that. So, for example, the people who are working to start new investment funds that have a long-term horizon. If those of us who have money to invest put it into funds that take that long-term horizon, that dampens it down, for example. The profit expectations have been dampened down right now, for sure. There is that psychological component to it as well.

**Question (continued):** But how?

**Schor:** Well, I just gave two examples. One is the new kinds of investment vehicles that have different profit expectations written into them, first of all. The other thing you can do is put taxes on transactions, which will slow down the number of transactions. There are other things you can do in terms of more reporting conventions; maybe companies report their earnings twice a year rather than quarterly. All those kinds of things will have an impact. So there are policy changes that will have impacts, and I don’t think they’re that hard to figure out.

**Question from the Audience:** On this topic of consumerism, I want to bring the commoditization of ideas to the table. What we’re talking about is how we can change this needy, ever open gap, this pit, this sense of not having enough, that drives this neediness. Well, the way to cure that one way is education – true education, capital “E” education. And I notice that today we’re losing that. Rarely are kids spending so much of their time on ideas that they turn in a paper four days late because they cared so much about writing it that they chose to turn it in late over the grade. Because right now we’ve taken the very heart and soul and the being-ness out of ideas, just like we’ve taken it out of clothes, just like we’ve taken it out of objects. It’s a paradox, though, because now the new economy is of ideas as we trade them. It is a sustainable form of economics because ideas – the natural capital, the resources – are infinite. It’s a human resource; it’s not like cutting down trees. It’s making ideas. How can we bring back the integrity, the sincerity, and the intimacy into the life of the mind, because it has lost that intimacy just like it has in the exterior world? Here we are at Stanford. How can we encourage this new level of sensuality with ideas themselves and with words? [Applause]

**Schor:** I’ll say two things. One is probably the most depressing result as a college professor I ever had in any of my research was the result that found that the more highly educated a person was, in particular, getting a college education, had a huge impact on upscaling people’s consumer aspirations and upscaling their reference groups, and so on.
That’s the negative side of part of what happens in higher education today, which connects with some of those things we were talking about. I think part of it has to be de-emphasizing the grades and the competitiveness and all of those dimensions, which have become so important in education, and the sort of instrumental dimensions of education to get back to what you’re talking about. So the more that we can create educational spaces and activities that are just there for themselves, not for other purposes, that’s how we start to recapture more of those things that you’re talking about.

**Loy:** I think the parallel that you point out is very important. Just as we were making the point about being caught up in civilization and not realizing fully the sensuousness of a glass of wine, or whatever, exactly the same issue is involved in this question of what’s going on in the education process – this reversal of means and ends, where all the stuff that was supposed to be encouraging is just a means to the grade, to the degree, to the job, to the higher salary, and so forth. It’s exactly the same challenge. I’m not saying that there’s an easy solution to it, but the first step certainly is to realize how it is that our priorities have become reversed in both cases.

**Question (continued):** That’s the great irony, because I came here with this double-edged sword knowing that part of me was here for the sincerity, the integrity, and the intimacy, and part of it was this hunger of ideas that I have, and many students have, where we’re constantly trying to expose ourselves and go to as many lectures as possible, and yet we’re not sitting with them like we sit with a friend in a hot tub. We’re just moving through them. That was part of the reason I came here. It’s funny because there’s this paradox. Maybe other people who have come here tonight…. Part of it is this sense of intellectual neediness. Maybe this lecture will give me something so that when I walk away from it, I’ll never need to go to a lecture again. [Laughter]

**Loy:** You’ve had the great realization that true education is about transformation. It’s not just about getting information that can be cashed in in certain ways, but we’re really trying to mature and be transformed, which is where that fits in very nicely with what the spiritual is really about. Ultimately, I think the distinction between them is not very sharp. They’re both working toward this maturation process.

**Gonnerman:** Don’t stop caring.

**Question from the Audience:** I was really intrigued by your comments about President Roosevelt and the decisions that he made or perhaps failed to make during the Great Depression. To deal with somewhat more mundane issues, I think President Obama is going to be facing very similar issues right now. So far, what we’ve done collectively as a country on a bipartisan basis is pump somewhere between $700 billion and $7 trillion worth of purchasing power into the U.S. economy, and other nations have been doing that throughout the world. Collectively, we might have spent something on the order of $5 trillion to $15 trillion through the world economy. And I think we’ve done that to a large extent because we, as citizens, since we’re talking about citizenship in these forums, have said that that’s what we want to have happen. I guess the question that I have for you, particularly with your reference to sustainability and the environmental movement, is: if
each of you had a seat at the Cabinet table in the Obama administration on January 20 and you were being asked if we should keep putting more money into the economy, should we now start spending hundreds of billions of dollars to support research and development of alternative energy sources and things like that, with the expectation that that’s going to create more jobs, more spending, and drive future economic growth, would you be counseling that? Would you be arguing to President Obama that, no, actually what you should be doing is cutting back on the spending because that’s really what we need for the long term? Would you be saying instead that we should be focusing much more on conservation and not be putting all this money into developing alternative fuels? How would you counsel the Obama administration in the first days of a new presidential era?

Schor: I think we need to put the money into an energy transition. That’s essential, and we’re going to need money to do conservation, you need money to train people to do weatherization and insulation and those kinds of things, and alternative technologies. As much of the stimulus as possible should go toward the creation of a green economy, both on the energy side and on other things – organic and local farming, local economy kinds of things. Less just checks into people’s pockets and more helping them create long-term assets or economic opportunity, which creates a sustainable economy. I think that’s where we should go. Tom Friedman’s new book, Hot, Flat and Crowded is sort of the first part of this: Oh, we have a terrible ecological crisis, so let’s put a lot of money into green technology, energy technologies, and oh, by the way, that’s going to be our new growth strategy. That’s the part of it that’s a problem. We need to shift to a sustainable economy, but not for the purpose of growing. So we have to put in place at the same time these labor market policies that I was getting at on the work-time side, because that’s the only way to shift toward a slow or no-growth economy, which is what we’ve got to do at least in the medium term. That’s why spreading the work and shorter hours, and so forth, is really key, because you can’t get slow or no growth without it. What are you going to give people as an alternative to rising incomes? You’ve got to give them their lives back. That’s the only deal that makes sense. It’s the only thing you can offer. So I think the model that says alternative energy as a new growth platform is just crazy. It’s missing the point and it’s back to the old rebound effect that we have in economics. You have technical improvements in energy efficiency, and people just consume more energy. You defeat the purpose. That’s what using it as a growth strategy would do.

Question (continued): I think those are great ideas. I’m very fearful it’s going to be exactly the opposite, but we’ll see.

Schor: It will still be good to get a green energy system. That’s still one step ahead of where we are today.

Question from the Audience: Unfortunately, I cannot remember the source of this quote that I’d like to share. About five years ago, I read somewhere: “Shop as though money were a consensual hallucination.” And I think that’s what we’ve been doing. So, shop as though money were a consensual hallucination is absolutely counter to what my grandparents, who were in their late teens and twenties during the Great Depression,
always told me, which was, Don’t buy anything you can’t pay for. I’m absolutely
astronomed how in two generations, and my last grandparent passed away only ten years
ago, how quickly we got to a point where our economy was so entrenched on debt. It
seems to me that debt has been the engine of growth for our economy, and I guess I have
to say that quite frankly I’m a little bit angry about how big business (auto manufacturing
leaders and folks) are saying, Bail us out; we need loans so that we can make our payroll.
Whatever happened to keeping your business in line with the money that you can make?
[Applause] Could you talk a little bit about how there’s sort of that parallel between the
individual consumerism and the consumerism that we are kind of condoning in our
business world.

LOY: It seems to me there’s quite a fascinating parallel between money on the individual
level and money on the collective level. Both of them, it seems, are subject to, or prone
or are vulnerable to, this Midas complex that I was talking about before. In one way, I
think what you’re saying is exactly right about money as a consensual hallucination. I
mean, what is money? Money is a social construct ultimately, right? Those pieces of
paper in our pocket or those magical numbers in our bank accounts represent ultimately
just the ability to transform one thing into another, and that’s the great irony of Midas,
Isn’t it, that by wanting to have this golden touch, he’s sacrificing everything for
something that is ultimately nothing. I’m wondering if that isn’t exactly the same thing
about our consumer/corporate/capitalist system where the whole point of the system, the
motivation behind it (now Juliet is the economist so she can correct me here), but it just
seems to me that the idea is using money for investment that is capital to get more capital.
And the tendency then is that everything else becomes a means to that end. Everything
else becomes resources, including labor, land, and so forth. But if it’s the case that
money is really a social construction that actually has no reality in and of itself, then it’s
this incredible irony that the whole point of the system is to sacrifice everything.
Everything becomes a means to creating huge amounts of something that is ultimately
nothing. I’m really stuck on this paradox. Julie, can you explain where I’ve gong
wrong?

SCHOR: Well, it’s not nothing. It could disappear into nothing, as just happened to a lot
of us [Laughter] but ordinarily it’s the ability to command resources. It’s a social
arrangement that says: If I have it, I can make you do what I want, or I can force you to
give me what you have. In that sense, the idea that it’s just a piece of paper or it’s not
really anything, while true in one sense is, I think, not true in another.

LOY: Ultimately, it’s transformative ability, right? It’s power, but it’s abstract power.
Money is liquid power, in a way. It can be translated, but in and of itself, it’s only…. If
you don’t have any resources, if you don’t have land, if you don’t have something, then it
loses all that power. It’s only the ability to translate or to refer.

SCHOR: Right. It loses its power when the system breaks down. So in that sense it could
be a riskier thing to have than land, but if you don’t know how to farm, land isn’t going
to do you much good. That’s back to that point about skills, which is that we’re in an era
in which, I think, less reliance on what some people call the money system or the market
and building up a little bit more self-reliance to give us a little bit of insurance against what will now be, in the same way that the climate system is going to be more unstable, the economic system is going to be more unstable. So the more skills you have, you will be better positioned to live in the world. The more real stuff you know how to do, rather than just pieces of paper that you can accumulate…. A lot just depends on what economic system you’re in – how stable it is and how it’s functioning, and so forth.

**Gonnerman:** We’ll take just one more question and apologize to the other people who are still standing. Cecile Andrews has a question.

**Question from the Audience:** I just wanted to bring up, Juliet, your argument about shorter work hours and how they can contribute to sustainability. The second thing is: do we have a chance to go back to a thirty-hour work week, as we almost had in the thirties?

**Schor:** It’s not on the agenda to have a French-style, government-mandated thirty-hour work week, but in typical American individualist fashion, I think what we do have a chance for is more and more people opting for shorter hours of work. So we have a chance to move there de facto and then we could get maybe some legislation. We basically don’t have work-time legislation anymore. Not many people are covered by forty-hour overtime premia. It doesn’t really work that well, anyway, so maybe we could eventually get to some legislation if we get back into a mode where we actually have federal legislation. But we could also start doing this on more state and regional bases, as well. I think the key point is: can we start creating conditions of existence for large numbers of people so that they can live on the incomes that they would get from twenty- or thirty-hour work weeks? That’s really key. We’re a very wealthy society, and if we can start moving in ways that actually allow people to get education, health care, and retirement security without having to accumulate big bundles of money, if we have more collective provision of those things, which looks like at least some of them we’re going to be moving in that direction, then it makes it easier for people to live those lower hours-lower income lifestyles in ways that are actually very satisfying.

**Gonnerman:** David Loy, Juliet Schor, thank you for being here with us tonight. Thank you, everyone. We hope you’ll take something that you learned tonight and share it with your friends. Good night. [Applause]
David Loy, Besl Professor of Ethics, Religion and Society, Xavier University
Buddhist philosopher David Loy recently moved from the faculty of International Studies at Bunkyo University in Japan to Xavier University in Ohio. His 1997 article, “The Religion of the Market,” sparked an ongoing discussion about the nature of consumer capitalism which, he claims, is “the first truly world religion, binding all corners of the globe more and more tightly into a worldview and set of values whose religious role we overlook only because we insist upon seeing them as ‘secular.’” His books include A Buddhist History of the West, Lack and Transcendence, The Great Awakening: A Buddhist Social Theory, and Money, Sex, War, Karma: Notes for a Buddhist Revolution.

Juliet Schor, Chair and Professor of Sociology, Boston College
Juliet Schor’s research over the last ten years has focused on issues pertaining to trends in work and leisure, consumerism, the relationship between work and family, and economic justice. Her most recent book is Born to Buy: The Commercialized Child and the New Consumer Culture. This book is an account of marketing to children from inside the advertising agencies and an assessment of how these activities are affecting children. She is also the author of the national bestsellers, The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure, The Overspent American: Why we Want What We Don’t Need, and Do Americans Shop Too Much? She was appointed a Guggenheim Fellow for her work on consumer society, and in 2006 she won the Leontief Prize for contributions to expanding the frontiers of economic thought.

Comments?
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