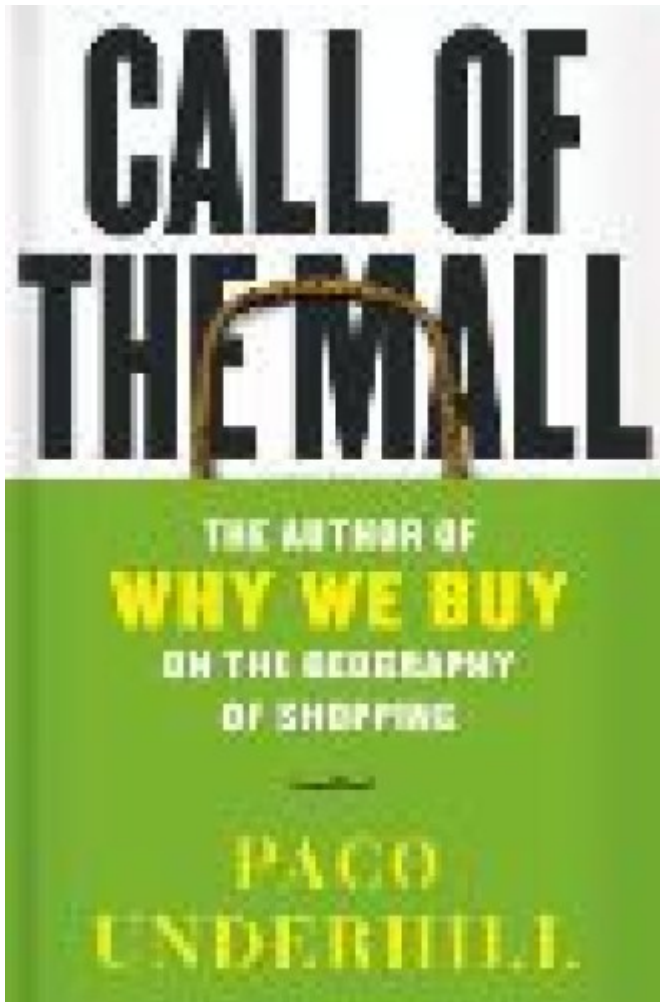


Call of the Mall/The Consumer Trap

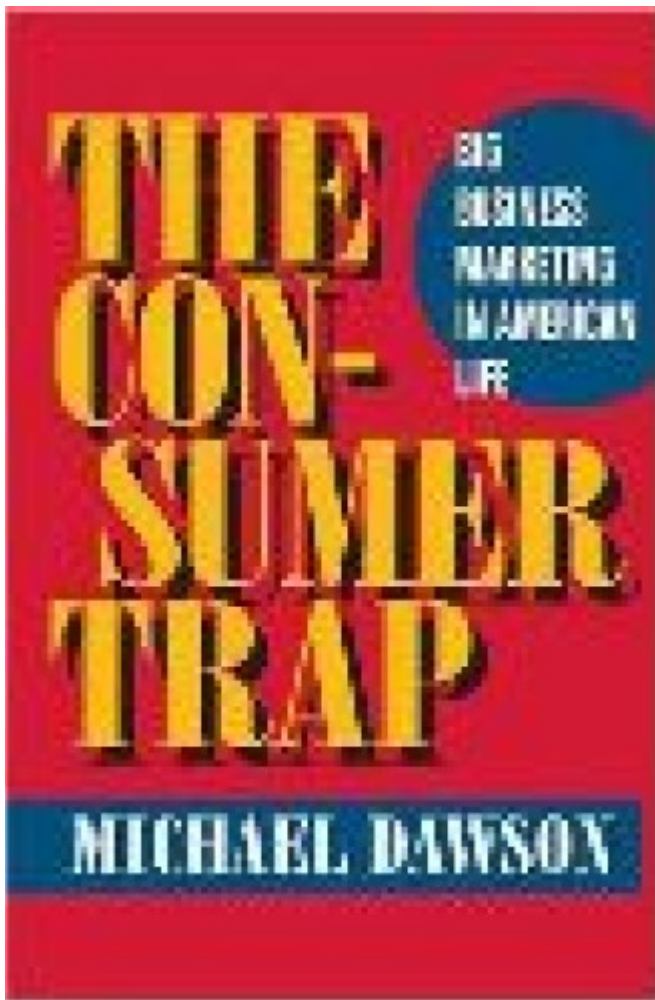
reviewed by [Dan Hertzler](#) in the [January 11, 2005](#) issue

In Review



Call of the Mall

Paco Underhill
Simon & Schuster



The Consumer Trap: Big Business Marketing in American Life

Michael Dawson

University of Illinois Press

Paco Underhill, a marketing enhancer, and Michael Dawson, a critic of the capitalistic marketing system, are working to achieve opposite goals, yet their books supplement each other in unexpected ways. Underhill, the founder of Envirosell, Inc., a global research and consulting firm, is an expert on consumer education whose clients have included the U.S. Postal Service and Wal-Mart. Dawson, a sociologist teaching at Portland State University, places himself in the tradition of Thorstein Veblen, who, in his *Theory of the Leisure Class*, held that “big business marketing was neither more nor less than a new embodiment of class coercion.”

Though Underhill sometimes writes as if he were pointing out the failings of mall merchandisers in a memo, his book also includes cultural observations on such

topics as the significance of jeans. In mall watching, the part of the human anatomy most looked at (after the face) is the gluteus maximus, an area that the right kind of jeans may enhance. But this is sociology lite by comparison with Dawson, who skewers the whole capitalistic marketing system as a tool of the moneyed interests (the one-half to 1 percent of the population who in 1998 owned a third of all stocks and bonds).

As a consultant to mall marketers, Underhill is concerned about such amenities as the location of the restrooms, the quality of the food in the food court and the convenience of parking. He describes the problems men typically have with malls by presenting the case of "Albert, a normal middle-aged guy . . . shopping for jewelry for his wife." Underhill goes shopping with a group of adolescent girls and observes that teenagers "manage, even with limited productivity, to represent a lot of buying power." In his last chapter he concludes that the mall's heyday is over. "The featureless, flavorless architecture of these monstrosities would give future generations no good reason to rehabilitate them."

Dawson's concerns are more basic and wide-ranging. He places Underhill in his rogues' gallery, along with the marketers of such products as Campbell Soup, Pepsi-Cola and Alka-Seltzer. He condemns big-business marketing as "a system for profitably crafting and applying stealthy little versions of the force and fraud that have always sustained class dominance." The original rogue in Dawson's gallery is Frederick Winslow Taylor (d. 1915), "father of scientific management." Taylor saw human beings as "the great raw material," and reminded critics that every business corporation "exists first, last and all the time for the purpose of paying dividends to its owners."

After big business's efficiency in production resulted in a surplus of goods, the problem became how to persuade the less than affluent to spend their scarce resources to enrich the portfolios of the wealthy. Here is where consultants like Underhill come in. "Just as Taylor used stopwatches and slide rules to reveal labor-saving potentials concealed in workers' on-the-job practices, so Envirosell uses 'patient observation and analysis' to solve retailing 'problems that remain hidden in plain view,'" Dawson charges.

One of the fictions the marketing system foists on us is the idea that we have choices. Of course we can choose between one automobile and another, but suppose we prefer public transportation? In many communities public transportation

has disappeared, in part because of the interstate highway system developed in the '50s during the Eisenhower administration. In the U.S., the “public subsidy of automobile infrastructure and public hostility to rail systems [have become] more sacrosanct in federal politics than military spending.” Yet, Dawson reports, “between 1950 and 1989 there were more than 1.7 million people killed in automobile collisions in the United States,” more than “all U.S. war casualties in American history.” The big-business marketing system has been so effective that hardly anyone thinks to challenge the automobile. It remains the first big purchase nearly every adolescent wants to make.

The way out of the consumer trap, Dawson suggests, is to turn to a form of democratic socialism. He mentions a number of services already provided by the public sector: the delivery of mail, teaching of children, paving of streets and training of soldiers. Social Security and Medicare, two of the more successful public programs, could be added to the list. Their relative success may be highlighted by the efforts of the Bush administration to modify them. But the tremendous influence of Washington lobbyists makes one wonder how much significant change in the delivery of services could really come about.

In the meantime, small things can be done. I consciously resist television advertising, looking for an alternative to anything promoted there. And there are signs of life in food distribution, in the direct selling of food by producers to consumers—a kind of merchandising promoted by organizations like the Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture. Promoting such efforts helps us to “put people before profits.”