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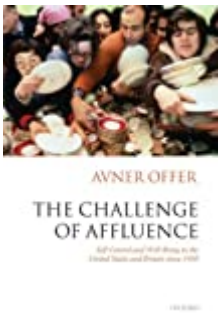

Avner Offer. *The Challenge of Affluence: Self-Control and Well-Being in the United States and Britain since 1950.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. Illustrations, graphs, tables. xvii + 454 pp. $25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-921662-8.

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Embarras de richesse

The Challenge of Affluence is not an easy book to read (still less to review), and it must have been a difficult book to write. The main reason is that it is at the intersection of a large number of disciplines and specialisms: economics, naturally, but also sociology, psychology, and, some might even say, sexology, with chapter 13 being devoted to âMating since the 1950s.â In short, this monograph draws whenever necessary on the various strands of that elusive notion, âthe humanities.â Without wanting to appear pedantic by an overdose of Latin, we could say that Avner Offer wants to go beyond âHomo economicusâ to see the interaction between what makes âHomo economicusâ and what makes âHomo sapiensâ (i.e., human creatures who think seriously about their place in society) in the two countries covered since 1950.

Thus, on top of mating, as already mentioned, we have reflections on body weight (chapter 7) and on household appliances (chapter 8)–all arguably from the private sphere–as well as discussions of the pursuit of status (chapter 11) and inequality (chapter 12), decidedly more connected with societal factors. This is obviously an impressive task that Offer set for himself, and the reader is naturally diffident, in case (to use a colloquial expression) âhe bit more than he could chew.â To add to the sense of being overwhelmed by the sheer weight of information, the reader is faced with mathematical equations and complex graphs speaking of âexponential and hyperbolical discountingâ–which not everyone versed in âthe humanitiesâ is equipped to understand (p. 44). On top of that, the reader has to âdigestâ forty-five figures, twenty-nine tables, and seventy-one pages of bibliography. The obvious danger is that (to use another familiar phrase) one âcould have too much of a good thing.â

Such is not the case: Offer has managed to avoid âoverkill.â Admittedly, the book cannot be read like a novel–saturation sets in rather quickly, as in all works with large numbers of figures, at least for those who are not experts in all the fields covered. One wonders, in fact, if any single expert already masters all these fields. The book is likely to be successful among readers with different academic backgrounds; one is sure to learn something in the vast array of insights provided.

For instance, I must unashamedly confess that my basic readings on âaffluenceâ and âstatusâ dated back to J. K. Galbraithâs *The Affluent Society* (1958) and Vance Packardâs *The Status Seekers: An Exploration of Class Behavior in America and the Hidden Barriers That Affect You, Your Community, Your Future* (1959), read some time in the late 1960s. Even though I must also confess that I do not really understand all the figures and tables in chapter 11, âAffluence and the Pursuit of Status,â I enjoyed reading it, if only because it told me of things that I like to hear, such as âriches do not guarantee regardâ and âteachers ... are respected for rank and not wealthâ (p. 234). I also liked the (good) questions posed by Offer, for instance: âIncome per head has increased more than threefold between 1940 and 2000 in the United States. What difference has this made to social standing?â (p. 241). My problem–but it is a personal problem, not a problem attributable to the author–is that I was not really able to follow the very complex discussion which tried to answer that fascinating question. No doubt other readers, with a better command of the tools of quantitative sociology and the literature on socioeconomic questions, notably the debate on the value of Duncanâs âsocio-economic indexâ (SEI), would follow the reasoning with delectation. The chapter, however, contains a âgemâ accessible to all readers: the advertisement âSuburban bluesâ from the J. Walter Thompson agency, 1956, showing a bored, attractive housewife with apron and broomstick in a leafy suburb (figure 11-6). The âWisteria Laneâ flavor in it shows that there never is anything new under the sun–at least in Middle America.

One difficulty for Offer, of course, is that his title promises a discussion of both Britain and the United States. Counting the number of lines devoted to each would not naturally make sense, but my overall impression is that most of the cases discussed and statistics adduced relate to the American experience. There are occasional comparative forays into United Kingdom facts and figures, but they remain a minority in the book. Another âgemâ is to be found in a USA-only chapter, âAmerican Automobile Frenzy,â in the form of an ode to a Buick, with risquÃ© sexual overtones for the time, published in a collection of poems in 1953, which perfectly makes his point that for the average American male (whatever his social status) buying a new car provided âsensual gratificationâ (pp. 203, 206, 211). Still, this is followed by a chapter which shows that British buyers kept their cars longer, and when talking of the cost of a wedding, Offer does give the figures in both countries: âan average Â£16,000-17,000 in the UK today, some $19,000 in the USAâ (p. 311). Some reflections of a general nature are, of course, valid in both countries (perhaps everywhere in the Western world, in fact), like the ostensibly matter-of-fact remark that âmating currencies depreciate with age for women, and appreciate for menâ and the corrective that (reassuringly?) âintimacy, sexuality, and reproduction are rarely a straightforward market exchangeâ (pp. 306, 308).

In a way, this is related to what Offer has to say in his superb (and impeccably comparative) chapter on body weight (the spread and control of obesity in both countries): âThe conventions of attractiveness place weight norms well below current averageâ (p. 140). Perhaps because I did not find it as hard to follow as the chapter on affluence and status, I enjoyed it a lot, notably the fascinating table 7-3, which convincingly shows the relation between weight and class, and the useful reminder that âunder indigence, girth signals wealth and power. Under affluence, it is slimness that is difficult, and demonstrates a capacity for self-control. If self-control is costly, it is more readily available to the well-off than to the poorâ (p. 153).

Offer obviously likes paradox and provocation: he enjoys pointing to the contradictions of received certainties, be it in the consumerâs perceived (and spurious) gratification, thanks to the idea that more is better (not a new line of attack), or in the attitudes to the family, where he suggests with great relish that âpolitical postures are reversed,â with the provocative (but difficult to challenge) argument that âfreedom of choice is as much a norm of liberal feminism as it is of Milton Friedmanâ (p. 344). Naturally, Offer plays on the different meanings of âliberalâ at different times and among different authors, but fundamentally he is right to point out that freedom is a continuum that cannot be divided in the eyes of the classical philosophers. One aspect of his love for provocation, which some readers will find irritating, others felicitous, is his choice of âsheâ as the âneutralâ pronoun, as in âwhen a buyer acquired a new car, she paid the retail priceâ: the (deliberate) effect is all the more startling in this sentence as readers know that most new cars were bought by men in the 1950s (p. 223).

If such elements are provocative in the literal sense, others are provocative in a more subtle way, in that they induce the readers to think twice about what they thought was a given–a case in point being the implied benefit of household appliances. Most people would instinctively define them as labor-saving and therefore time-saving inventions. But Offer cleverly points out

that home entertaining appliances, like television, are not time-saving, but âtime-usingâ ones. And he suggests that the time saved thanks to, for example, a washing machine, is immediately reinvested in watching television or listening to radio: âRoughly speaking the time saved by one set of appliances was consumed by the other,â with little, if any, difference between Britain and the United States, apart from the (fast reducing) time-lag in their introduction and diffusion (p. 170, table 8.1).

And just as the old dictum tells us that âbeauty is in the eye of the beholder,â Offer reminds us of what could be seen as the basic law of economics–which justifies his incursions in the territory of psychology: âUltimately, all rewards are in the mindâ (p. 9). This is largely confirmed by one of the âfindingsâ that make up his conclusion: âSurveys of satisfaction in the United States and Britain have found the two countries to be roughly level with regard to subjective well-being, although Britain is more than twenty years behind in terms of absolute prosperityâ (p. 364). He uses this âfindingâ to good effect in the last paragraph of the book, when he repeats it in a shorter, most effective form: âWell-being is more than having moreâ (p. 372).

All is done for the comfort of the reader: one has an adequate index, copious, convenient footnotes (as opposed to endnotes, always irritatingly difficult to find when needed), and exemplary, faultless proofreading. The book is largely the rearrangement of articles previously published elsewhere (as clearly indicated in the acknowledgments, but it never appears as a patchwork of disparate discussions–the only sense of disjunction is perhaps to be found in the heavily âtechnicalâ chapter 11, âAffluence and the Pursuit of Status.â As noted before, it requires previous knowledge and this sets it somewhat apart, since no specialized knowledge is necessary to fully enjoy the rest of the book.

It is, therefore, clear that *The Challenge of Affluence* should be in all university libraries. I would not recommend it for first-degree students–it might be a little heavy-going and they might not have enough critical distance to identify and enjoy the provocative passages–but there is no doubt that postgraduates in the humanities (in a wide sense) would immensely benefit from reading this insightful reflection on some of the most important choices (or non-choices) made in the two societies in the second half of the twentieth century.