Preface

It is always easier to be critical than creative, just as it is easier to follow than to lead. This book is unambiguously positive in character. It faces up to the challenge posed by John Kenneth Galbraith over 50 years ago in order to make a constructive contribution to a different style of economic analysis – the economics of abundance.

The starting point for this book began with the realisation that mainstream and heterodox economists – with some honourable exceptions – had little to offer to the explanation of spending by affluent consumers. Other disciplines have taken the topic much more seriously, but with perhaps insufficient appreciation of the general market form in the system of abundance. Certainly it is true that for far too long, non-economists have had to rely on the works of Thorstein Veblen and J.K. Galbraith to provide economic insights on affluent consumption.

Consequently I embarked upon an autodidactic multi-disciplinary process, criss-crossing over existing academic boundaries, to read extensively how other disciplines dealt with affluent consumption by, and marketing messages targeted towards, the people of plenty. I engaged with seminal contributions produced by a variety of academics that have changed the way other disciplines think about affluent consumption, which sadly go unrecognised by the economics profession. Hopefully I have been able to extract some of the best of what other disciplines have had to offer in order to develop a distinctive heterodox economic perspective.

Economists of all persuasions should be intrigued by the content of the book. The likelihood, however, is that it will be more attractive to those who have powerful reservations about mainstream economics. It may even be the case that those in other disciplines – such as anthropology, economic and social history, sociology, social psychology, sustainable development, architecture, art and design, marketing and cultural studies – will have most reason to embrace its ideas. The book, however, is just a beginning. It opens up a new research agenda. Others will have the opportunity to make their own contribution. Hopefully it will stimulate a multi-disciplinary dialogue between academics who might not otherwise appreciate what they share in common. Time will tell if it does so.

My embryonic ideas were first set out in a research paper entitled ‘The management of specific demand – Galbraith revised’ that I co-authored with a

colleague, Karl Petrick. It was presented at both the Post-Keynesian Annual Conference in June 2002 at the University of Missouri–Kansas City, and in Dublin, Ireland, at the annual conference of the Association of Heterodox Economics in July 2002. It received such a positive response at both venues I was encouraged to embark on the challenging project culminating in this book. The project has taken much longer to complete than I first expected. Like all authorship, if one knew how arduous the intellectual journey would be at the outset, one probably would not begin. However, now that the journey is complete, I admit I would not have missed it for the world.

No book is an individual effort. Many others helped along the way. I am indebted to Piet Keizer and Adel Daoud for their many sagacious comments on earlier drafts of chapters. These two academics do not agree with all the arguments contained in this book, but have given generously of their time and effort. They have consistently provided coherent criticisms and have assiduously highlighted aspects of the argument that have not been sufficiently well expressed. I am extremely grateful to my sister Maire Smith for both her guidance through the psychological literature and wise comments on various chapters. I am very grateful to my friend Steve Dalton for pointing me in the direction of Galbraith when I first began to espouse my nascent ideas, and offering helpful comments on draft chapters. In addition I would like to thank Karl Petrick for giving me assistance in getting this project off the ground.

Parts of early drafts of chapters, that formed research papers, were presented at numerous seminars, workshops and conferences over the past seven years. Specifically, key aspects of Chapter 3 were presented in 2005 and parts of Chapter 5 in 2007 to the Social Science Seminar Series at Leeds Metropolitan University. An early version of the appendix to Chapter 2 was presented at the Economics Seminar Series at Manchester Metropolitan University in 2003. Parts of Chapter 1 and Chapter 3 were presented as a paper entitled ‘Consumer culture and economic performance – the role of the institution of marketing’ to the SCHEME Workshop on Culture and Economic Performance held in Stirling in 2009. Finally parts of Chapters 2, 3 and 6 were presented as papers to the Association for Heterodox Economics Conference at the University of Leeds in 2004, the University of the West of England in 2007 and Kingston University in 2009 respectively. I am grateful for the comments provided by all the participants of these events.

It is also important to thank Anne Gregory, Liz Yeomans, John Embery, John Sutherland and Ghulam Nabi for the helpful comments they have made on early versions of chapters. In addition I would like to thank Andrew Trigg for his positive response and interest in the ideas I was putting forward. Finally I would like to thank my wife Jane for her considerable attention to detail when proofreading my contribution and, of course, for her perpetual love and support. I have dedicated the book to her.

The book is immeasurably better as a result of all these helpful contributions. But having thanked others it is important to note that all errors and omissions are entirely my responsibility.

Brendan Sheehan
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