



Conversations with the Experts

Integrating Work in Academe and Advocacy: A Conversation with Juliet Schor by Brian Hoey



Juliet Schor, Ph.D.

Bio: Juliet Schor is Professor of Sociology at Boston College. Before joining the faculty at Boston College, Professor Schor taught at Harvard University for 17 years, where she was Associate Professor of Economics and then Director of Studies in Women's Studies. She also holds a Chair in the Economics of Leisure Studies at Tilburg University in the Netherlands. Professor Schor is the author of the best-selling book, *The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure* (Basic Books, 1992), and *The Overspent American: Upscaling, Downshifting and the New Consumer* (Basic Books, 1998). Two recent books are *Do Americans Shop Too Much?* (Beacon Press, 2000) and *The Consumer Society Reader* (The New Press, 2000, co-edited with Douglas Holt). She has a forthcoming co-edited volume with Beacon Press entitled *Sustainable Planet: Solutions for the 21st Century*.

Professor Schor has served as a consultant to the United Nations, at the World Institute for Development Economics Research, and the United Nations Development Program. She was a 1995 Guggenheim Fellow for a project on consumer spending.

Brian Hoey, Ph.D.

Bio: Brian Hoey received his Ph.D. in Anthropology at the University of Michigan this year having successfully completed his dissertation research project entitled "Changing Places: Life-style, Migration, Refuge, and the Quest for Potential Selves in the Midwest's Post-industrial Middle Class." Hoey is currently a Post-doctoral Fellow at The Alfred P. Sloan Center for the Ethnography of Everyday Life in Ann Arbor. A past Fulbright Scholar to Indonesia, he maintains an interest in nation building and the politics of culture in addition to his current focus on issues of career change, relocation, and personal identity in the American middle class. Ready to begin his own career, Hoey would like to find a liberal arts college that emphasizes quality, inter-disciplinary teaching to call home and settle down with his wife, Bonnie.

Editors Note: Juliet Schor is an academic who goes beyond creating knowledge for the sake of knowledge. Schor is committed to creating change. Recently, Brian Hoey (Sloan Center for the Ethnography of Everyday Life in Ann Arbor) spoke with Schor about her career as a social scientist, professor, public speaker, and advocate for change.

A Conversation with Juliet Schor

"I think one of the most important things that we as academics who want to get involved in 'advocacy, policy, and the real world out there' can do is to provide people with new ways of thinking and to provide paradigms that overturn the conventional wisdom. A lot of advocacy is about changing people's ideas, whether it is about the global economy, the kinds of consumers that we are, or what our work lives are like."

Juliet Schor did not expect to become an academic. When she entered graduate school in 1976, it was not to pursue a career in academe. Schor felt that she needed to know more about how the world worked in order to be successful in the political activism and advocacy in which she had been involved beginning as early as her junior high days during the social upheaval of the 1960's. Schor had not realized, however, how powerful the experience of being socialized into a particular discipline would be. But Schor remained committed to using her intellectual work for larger goals. This commitment has defined her career not only as an academic but also as an advocate for social justice

and transformation. Schor reflects: "When I think over my work, a lot of it is devoted to overturning the conventional paradigms and ways of thinking about the world that we have. In my writings on work time, for example, I was arguing against the model of neo-classical economics for a different model of how we understand what determines working hours. When you change the basic paradigm, lots of different policy conclusions fall from that."

While Schor describes her start in economic analysis as much more conventional than the kind of "daily-life economics" she is doing today, it seems she has long gone against the grain of conventional wisdom. For much of her early career, Schor focused on working within her discipline of economics with the goal of making changes she hoped would introduce more critical ideas and perspectives. What Schor found early on was that her choice to come at important economic and social questions from outside the prevailing, mainstream paradigm made it harder for the policy implications of her ideas to gain influence. The policy arena, she explains, tends to be dominated by a narrow set of ideas and paradigms. This choice was not the path of least resistance. Schor comments that her decision was made without regard to career consequences: "If I had been concerned about my career, I would have worked in a different paradigm. As a left-wing economist, I immediately had a legitimacy gap because that is not a valued paradigm within the discipline."

Beginning in graduate school, Schor was devoted to popularizing the field of economics. She worked with other students to found an institution devoted to training political activists in economics. The premise of The Center for Popular Economics, according to Schor, "was to teach people who were not academics how to understand economic analysis and to give them facility in it so they could become economic analysts themselves in their own work." She also helped to start the publishing house, South End Press, which was oriented toward trade books. Schor describes these projects as important outlets for her advocacy work during much of her early career. Through her time at Harvard in the early 90's, she concentrated on work within her profession as she attempted to change the debate within national and international policy circles about such topics as globalization and the IMF.

Around 1990, Schor began to feel differently about what was possible for change within her discipline as it became increasingly conservative and less open to the kinds of ideas that she had. With the publishing of her book *The Overworked American* in 1992, Schor felt that she began speaking to a broader audience: "I turned outward because that work had a lot of resonance across a broad spectrum of disciplines." Readers of *Overworked* or *The Overspent American* (1998) will know how accessible they are. Schor explains that she has been very committed to this accessibility: "I have always felt that both in terms of how you write and how you teach that breaking down the barrier between the academy and people outside is really important. I see a lot of what goes on as unnecessarily making knowledge inaccessible." Schor would now locate herself at the intersection between sociology and economics. She notes that *Overspent* is quite sociological "although it straddles economics and sociology." What term would she use to describe herself today? Probably the best term, she explains, would be "social scientist" because of the number of disciplines she has crossed. Her upcoming work reaches beyond economics and sociology to draw on psychology as well.

Schor also emphasizes the importance of her classroom teaching as a means of fulfilling her commitment to social justice and transformation. Schor remarks that one of the appeals of her position at Boston College is the ability to further integrate her political and intellectual work by bringing her teaching more fully into line with her core values. She notes that "I can bring in graduate students working on just the research areas I'm involved in. I didn't have that opportunity at Harvard." Her interest extends to undergraduate training as well. Schor points to her course on consumer society, which deals with the debate, critiques, defenses, pros and cons, and alternatives. The course is closely focused around key questions that interest her. In keeping with her sense of moral responsibility, Schor hopes to provide students with a critical perspective. Teaching students how to be critical and to see problems from different points of view is essential. Not surprisingly, Schor is happy to have large lecture classes of 200 students: "I really like to be able to reach large numbers with a different point of view than what the dominant culture is teaching."

This is one of the reasons that Schor enjoys public speaking. After writing a best selling book, Schor found herself doing a great deal of speaking before a vast array of groups. One of the consequences of her choice of issues to deal with, starting with *Overworked*, was that her work tended to attract a very wide range of groups from those interested in productivity and economics, work/family issues, to the environment and children. Schor comments that she has been able "to speak to a broad spectrum of groups because issues of working and spending touch a wide swath of society".

Schor feels that is very important to have integration within her work and personal life and aspirations. She feels a sense of urgency today, which she describes as a result of having a "shorter time horizon." Schor has less desire and ability to do things that do not speak to the urgency she feels about the ecologically devastating path that we are taking as a society. Working to change her discipline remains a part of her personal quest, but today Schor feels a need to make a more immediate impact in order to change our course.

These days Schor is busy finishing a new book that will follow in the path of her two well-known books on consumer

society. This new book, she explains, deals with children and consumerism and is tentatively entitled *The Commercialization of Childhood* (forthcoming from Scribner's and Sons 2003). Her next work will focus on ecological sustainability and economics, which Schor describes as "a key piece of the puzzle." Schor has a coedited volume (with Betsy Taylor of the Center for a New American Dream) due in November 2002 titled *Sustainable Planet: Solutions for the 21st Century* (Beacon Press).

Does Schor have advice for academics and researchers wishing to become more involved in public policy and advocacy? In her own work, Schor has seen people do this in many different ways. Ultimately, Schor finds that "People have to choose the way that is going to feel comfortable to them and is going to fulfill them as an individual and do it in a way that utilizes their strengths and interests." She suggests that those not interested in engaging at the national or international levels might look to more opportunities to contribute their expertise in finding solutions to social and ecological problems. Once you have made the choice, Schor explains, "There are so many ways that you can get involved. A lot depends on the kind of person you are."

Schor is a founding board member of the Center for a New American Dream, an organization devoted to making U.S. lifestyles more sustainable. Visit <http://www.newdream.org>

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