Boorstin Proposes New Concept Of 'Communities Of Consumption'

By MICHAEL DAVIS

Daniel Boorstin introduced the idea of the “consumption community” as a new and meaningful way to view human relationships, to a small assemblage Wednesday night in the Chemistry Lecture Hall.

Boorstin, professor of history in the University of Chicago, defined a consumption community as all those feeling a mutual interest and concern arising from the common consumption of a commodity. A set of all cigarette smokers, for example, would constitute such a consumption community; a subset of all Tareyton smokers would make up an even more intimate community.

Boorstin suggested that consumption communities are not unique to America but are more highly developed here because of a peculiar combination of circumstances existing in the United States. Among these circumstances he included the desire of Americans for communal living, a relative abundance of resources and “things” to people, and a positive attitude towards the necessity and beneficence of change.

The Chicago historian addressed himself to the question, “is there a distinctive American attitude toward material well-being?” He posited two contending theories regarding the acquisition of material things:

The first is the essentially mercantile idea of a world of fixed wealth in which one acquires things only at the expense of others.

The second is based on the idea of a “standard of living”, that the usable treasures of the world are expanding and that a man may enrich himself without impoverishing his fellows. In the static world of “wealth” poverty is expected and tolerated; in the progressive economy that supports a “standard of living” poverty is unnatural and can be eradicated.

The great contribution of America, says Boorstin, is that she demonstrated the truth of the “standard of living” idea. “America is characterized not by her high standard of living, but by the fact of a standard of living itself.”

In this progressive economic lay the seed of the consumption community. Mass production, rapid communication, mass media advertising, brand names, mail order houses and chain stores have facilitated the growth of these communities.

Boorstin suggests that the appeal of consumption communities may lie in the need for human relationships in a mass, impersonalized society. Association with other Tareyton smokers means sharing a personal experience, however consequential.