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### **“Summary of article by Joel Jay Kassiola: Materialism and Modern Political Philosophy”**

Materialism can mean either a philosophical doctrine or an ethic of acquisitiveness. The latter is central to an understanding of consumerism. Debates over materialism in both senses may be traced back to the contrasting views of human nature held by Hobbes and Rousseau. More recent discussion of acquisitiveness involves analogies to the psychopathology of addiction, and the significance which commodities assume in the eyes of consumers. In fact, an anthropological perspective suggests that, in industrial societies, commodities are desired more for the social values they represent than for any inherent physical characteristics.

### **HOBbesIAN VS ROUSSEAUIAN CONCEPTIONS OF MAN**

Thomas Hobbes, one of the founders of modern political philosophy, prescribed a thoroughgoing materialism in both senses of the word. More important than his philosophical view of materialism was his idea that competition lay at the heart of acquisitive behavior. This included several elements: individualism and competitive social values; and ceaseless striving for more material acquisition and power to defend against threats to one's past achievements. For Hobbes the acquisition process ends not with satisfaction or satiation but with death.

Jean Jacques Rousseau was perhaps the most penetrating early critic of such views of human nature and society. Rousseau accepted as descriptively true, but prescribed against, the Hobbesian vision of society founded on selfishness and competition. For Rousseau, egotistic individualism is a creation of society, not a part of human nature.

The distinction between natural and unnatural traits, between those desires which ought to be fulfilled and those which ought to be rejected, is a theme of political philosophy stretching back to Plato. It forms the basis for normative discourse about social values. Rousseau's conception of human nature underlies his critique of the competitiveness and alienation of modern society.

Adam Smith took for granted the drive for competitive social recognition, about which Hobbes seemed positive and Rousseau negative, and based his economic theory on it. For Smith, "that great purpose of human life which we call *bettering our condition*" (131) inspires economic activity. Noneconomic motives such as the desire for recognition and status are collapsed into pursuit of material advantage. Acquisitiveness and the propensity to trade are viewed as universal human traits.

When economic activity is based on the competitive pursuit of recognition, then there can never be enough. The desire for "goods of the imagination" is unlimited; the wants of the mind are infinite.<sup>1</sup> As modern as this problem may seem, it has been discussed by philosophers since the days of Aristotle. To the ancient Greeks, *pleonexia*, "the insatiable desire to have more," was a moral and political fault that Aristotle sought to redress in his theory of natural and limited acquisition.

## ON THE PSYCHOPATHOLOGY OF ADDICTION

The conception of human nature and society as based on unlimited acquisitiveness suggests an analogy to the pathology of addiction. The status-seeking consumer, like the addict, requires bigger and bigger doses to produce the same effect. In the words of Gerald Smith, "We get hooked on economic growth." A book on the subject, by Philip Slater, is entitled *Wealth Addiction*. In a similar vein, Tibor Scitovsky points out that "one reason for the persistence of habits is that once they are established, they become painful to stop."<sup>2</sup> He then applies this finding from experimental psychology to status-seeking consumption.

The addictive nature of consumption may explain the pervasive anxiety, noted by analysts from Hobbes onward, of a society characterized by unlimited competitive materialist values. Once one attains competitive success the greatest fear is of loss, in the sense of downward mobility, if others should get ahead. To protect against the withdrawal symptoms that would accompany a loss of relative status even the successful must continually seek more.

When goods are valued in relative or positional terms, there is no benefit to society from unlimited economic growth. More in an absolute sense does not, in fact cannot, mean more in a relative sense, as has been observed by writers ranging from Epicurus in ancient Greece, to Thorstein Veblen a century ago and Fred Hirsch more recently.

An important related perspective is found in the work of Karl Marx, especially his concept of the "fetishism of commodities" and the nature of goods in general within industrial capitalism. For Marx, individuals in a capitalist market make contact with one another solely through the exchange of commodities. Market value appears to be a relationship between commodities, when in fact it is a relationship between people, especially via the labor they expend in production.

The fetishism of commodities emphasizes the importance of material goods rather than social relations as the primary source of individual welfare. All the social values attached to commodities, such as recognition and competitive success, could be deemed fetishes in Marx's sense: human creations that distort or mystify reality. The pursuit of pure luxurious or positional goods, while millions of other human beings go hungry, is not only unproductive of happiness and a threat to the environment; it is unjust.

It is a mistake to confuse material welfare with human welfare, more broadly defined. There are many needs beyond physiological survival and safety requirements; self-actualization should not be defined in terms of material goods alone. Yet beginning with Hobbes, reductionist materialism has denied the possibility – or even desirability – of material saturation. Central to the materialist's denial of saturation and the resulting endless nature of material wants is the

(false) claim that the continual increase in material goods will produce a continuous increase in welfare or happiness.

## **INDUSTRIAL VALUES AND COMMODITIES**

Another treatment of these issues rejects the materialist approach to consumption in favor of what may be called the anthropology of consumption. In this approach, consumption of commodities is viewed as an information system whereby material possessions make visible statements about the owner's hierarchy of values. Implicitly, this establishes a broader, normative, nonmaterial component to the consumption of material goods, namely a representative or symbolic function.

For example, Leiss argues that every human need has a "symbolic correlate" and is mediated through elaborate patterns of social interactions; neither the material nor the symbolic aspects of needs can be reduced or collapsed into the other. Kelvin Lancaster views commodities as groups of traits, and says that "a producer is ultimately selling characteristic collections rather than goods."<sup>3</sup> If this view is correct, what matters to affluent consumers is not the particular commodities they own, but rather the culturally imputed values reflected by these material goods. A black and white television set has diminished cultural value (even if it works perfectly) once the neighbors all have color.

The relationship between the consumer's values and the characteristics of commodities is not a purely individual matter. Although experienced individually, the characteristics consumers perceive in material goods reflect the essential values of their society as a whole. If the society's values are competitive and embody endless, insatiable striving for objectives that are neither inherently desirable nor environmentally sustainable, then those values – and the society built on them – are in danger of extinction and do not deserve acceptance.

### **Notes**

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1. Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Cause of the Wealth of Nations*, Book I, chapter 12, Modern Library College Editions (New York: Random House, 1985), 15; cited by Kassiola, 131.
  2. Tibor Scitovsky, *The Joyless Economy*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1976; cited by Kassiola, 137.
  3. Kelvin Lancaster, "Change and Innovation in the Technology of Consumption," *American Economic Review* 56 (May 1966): 14-23; cited by Kassiola, 146.