

Culture of Consumerism

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The establishment of human settlements in the wake of the agricultural revolution about twelve thousand years ago, enabled man to produce more food than needed to sustain his life, which provided him with the time to think and contemplate and create other things. As a consequence, five major concepts emerged slowly and gradually deepened their roots in the prevailing culture: the idea of progress, the meaning of wealth, the lust for wealth accumulation, the role of savings in life, and the habit of excess consumption. This short paper intends to explain the concept of "conspicuous consumption" and analyze why and how it was created and identify its consequences on us and our planet.

As man produced more food, he began to save some of the produce and consume more. Rain, which usually makes it difficult for hunters to hunt animals, and for farmers to farm their land, forced people to learn how to save food for future consumption. Thus the need to "save for a rainy day" made savings a virtue. Meanwhile, wealth or the acquisition of material things emerged slowly as a means of production, a status symbol, and an instrument of power that enabled farmers and states to wage wars against each other and protect themselves from wild animals and foreign intruders.

The industrial revolution, which occurred in the second half of the 18th century, revolutionized the way products were made and, in the process, created millions of new jobs that forced countless families to relocate to industrial cities that had almost no amenities suitable for human living. As a result, the industrial revolution caused a deep sociocultural and socioeconomic transformation of industrial society, dividing it into three major social classes: an upper or a leisure class, a middle class, and a working lower class. However, within a hundred years or so, the industrial revolution enabled members of all classes to feel secure enough to save less, spend more, and indulge in consumption; thus giving birth to a new culture of "conspicuous consumption."

While some economists and social activists and religious men saw the new culture as a curse, arguing that it reflects an irrational behavior that is destined to hurt the poor, the

environment, and traditional values; others saw it as a virtue, arguing that it gives people the freedom to choose and to pursue happiness. During the great economic depression of the 1930s, some American politicians and businessmen popularized the slogan, "if you love your country, spend your money." Spending, they argued correctly, puts more money in circulation and thus helps economies grow and creates more jobs for the unemployed, and therefore paves the way to economic recovery. However, what really saved the West from the great depression was WW11 because all countries involved in the war had to produce more weapons and manufacture new ones capable of killing more people, destroying more tanks, military planes, buildings, roads, and cities. The war also ended unemployment because almost every able man and woman became a soldier.

During that war, scientists discovered new, more efficient ways to produce effective weapons and develop new machines and tools and systems never known before. Some of those machine and tools were later modified to perform civil tasks and make life easier to live and enjoy without many efforts; such machines and tools included the microwave, the vacuum cleaner, the dishwasher and many more. And as the new technologies were being developed, designers produced prototypes to show the people, while advertisers got busy making the new products appealing to the general public. But since manufacturers were trying to meet the needs of the military, none of the civil products were produced during the war. On the other hand, since almost everyone was fighting in the army, people were saving their incomes and waiting for the war to end to indulge in the new luxuries of life.

Consequently, the post-WWII era witnessed the production of millions of new, more efficient, and appealing cars, the development of commercial malls, the manufacturing of millions of the newly discovered and developed products, and the appearance of a culture of mass consumption. Advancements in the transportation and communications systems, cheap energy, and the abundance of money in the hands of the public helped popularize that culture and spread it to all corners of the globe. However, the culture of conspicuous consumption caused peoples' desires to be disconnected from their real needs, while causing their behavior to be disconnected from their indigenous cultures. People got obsessed with owning material things, not knowing that material things seldom translate into happiness, or enhance the quality of life. In many Third world countries, owning a car today is not a necessity but a status symbol,

causing many car owners to see themselves as keepers of cars they adore, not owners of cars they need to use for work.

Materialism and consumerism could be traced to the impact of the following factors:

1. The association of certain patterns of consumption with class and prestige.
2. The development of a credit system that allowed people to borrow against their assets, future incomes, and personal trustworthiness.
3. The commercialization of human fears and hopes and transforming them into objects and services to be sold for profit.
4. The development of powerful media capable of promoting all types of goods and services while pushing people to buy them.

Since the culture of the wealthy has never been the same as the culture of the middle class or the poor, people belonging to the middle class in particular have tried to imitate the wealthy and adopt their lifestyles. And because the majority of them do not have the financial means to live the life of the wealthy, many have become habitual borrowers living in a perpetual state of debt. As a result, most borrowers found themselves forced to work long hours and sometimes sacrifice necessities for the sake of luxuries they often did not need. As someone put it succinctly, "You work in a job you hate, to buy stuff you don't need, to impress people you don't like. So this is the new culture that appeared in most parts of the world after the WW!!.

For example, the impulse to smoke and buy cigarettes, and the urge to own mobile phones and upgrade them every time a new model is introduced, have caused the poor and the not-so-poor to ignore necessities like taking care of their health and buying books for their children to read. By the 1970s, commercialization caused a drastic shift in every culture, leading most people to move away from the traditional family values, the community spirit, spirituality, and personal and social responsibility, and toward individualism, competition, and materialism.

During the Second World War, as explained earlier, the American industry was busy building tanks, ships, and airplanes to support the military, while engineers and innovators were building prototypes for new consumer goods. Meanwhile, the media kept advertising the yet-

to-be-produced goods, creating new needs and the desire to satisfy them. The media in fact worked hard to separate needs from desires, making every desire a need, while creating new needs people never felt they had before. As soon as the war ended, attention shifted to producing the promised goods, causing people to stand in lines, sometimes for days to get them; just like the hype that accompanied the introduction of the Apple I-hone 15 years ago. In addition, emphasis on crime and terrorism has unintentionally created a need for security systems and services that caused a new worldwide industry worth hundreds of billions of dollars to be built.

Consumerism is driven by the trillions of dollars spent annually on advertising activities to create a universal desire to follow trends and keep up with the wealthy and powerful of the world. And as conspicuous consumption became the norm rather than the exception, greed, envy, social irresponsibility, corruption, and crime became prominent feature of the new culture, causing the gap between the wealthy and the poor to widen. By 2005, the wealthiest 20% of the world's population accounted for 77% of total consumption, while the poorest 20% accounted for just 1.5% of total consumption. And while the first group owned 87% of all cars, the second owned less than 1%. Moreover, in 2020 the wealthiest 10 persons in the world owned about 700 billion dollars in assets, in 2022, the wealth of those people surpassed \$1.5 trillion; they made during this two-year span about \$15,000 every second.

In times of economic recessions and financial stress, people usually rediscover the virtues of savings and traditional values. But to undermine people's obsession with consumption and materialism, we need to convince people at an early age that consumption at current levels cannot be sustained, and to instill in them the old virtues of savings, delayed gratification, and ambitions based on honesty and hard work. Ambitious people, generally speaking, must recognize the limits of their means and be content to live within the limits dictated by their abilities to produce. Charles von Doren wrote 30 years ago, saying: "The rich are never rich enough . . . to have enough is simply to be content with what you have rather than to have what you want. When wanting comes first, you can never have enough. If contentment is placed first, it does not matter how much you have because you will always have enough." (Van Doren: A History of Knowledge, 1991, 242) Arabs, who joined the culture of consumerism with passion, were unable to separate need from desire, or consumption from production.

While some wealthy Arabs live today on income derived from oil they have little to do with its production, others live largely on transfer payments sent by relatives working in other countries to support family members at home. The problem Arabs face therefore is more complicated than the one facing most other countries; it requires the restructuring of the predominant culture in the Arab world today, because it is neither traditional, nor modern; it is a culture with no particular identity. Therefore, no conservative or liberal Arab should object to restructuring a culture that is incapable of production or preserving its heritage.

In view of the current global economic and financial crises, it is not difficult to argue that consumerism and the desires and greed it creates and sustains are largely to blame for the global crises. While it enabled the greedy to manipulate the old and the young and ignorant and deceive them, it allowed the many to live beyond their means and indulge in conspicuous consumption. In fact, I believe that if "survival of the fittest" had been the law that governed the evolution of all species, "survival of the fattest" has emerged as a new law to govern the socioeconomic evolution of societies in the age of knowledge that globalized both economics and cultures with their misgivings.

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Prof. Rabie is a distinguished professor of International Political Economy; he attended 5 universities and taught at 10 others on four continents. He has published 58 books, about 200 scholarly papers, and over 2000 newspaper articles. Books are 16 in English, one in Albanian, and 41 in Arabic. English Books include *Saving Capitalism and Democracy*; *Global Economic and Cultural Transformation*; *A Theory of Sustainable Sociocultural and Economic Development*; *The Global Debt Crisis and its*

Socioeconomic Implications. (Palgrave Macmillan 2013-2017) One of the English books, "History of Racism", was translated and published in six other languages: German, French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, and Polish. Arabic Books include 3 poetry collections, 2 novels, and a story; the rest is mostly academic books and collections of ideas and reflections. Prof. Rabie is president of the Arab Thought Council in Washington, DC, a member of the Arab Thought Forum, and a fellow of the Alexander Von Humboldt Foundation since 1992. Grants and scholarships financed his education from high school to receiving his Ph.D. in 1970 from the University of Houston; grants covered studies in Jordan, Egypt, Germany, and America. He is the winner of the State of Palestine Lifetime Achievement Award for scholarly publications and several other awards. His writings and positions reflect a strong commitment to peace, social justice, freedom, human development, as well as social, cultural, economic, and environmental sustainability.

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