

Materialism in Historical Perspective

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Every human being comes to life with a strong desire to own things, which leads him to invest a lot of time and energy to acquire whatever material assets are available and reachable in society. In older times, the wanderer and gatherer man had very little things to acquire, and because he was always on the move, he could not carry around most of the things he would have liked to own. When man moved to the agricultural stages of human development some 10,000 years ago, private ownership appeared and began to play an important role in shaping social relations and social structures. The hamlets and villages, which man built and lived in, enabled him to own and enjoy more things.

However, private ownership remained simple and limited to a few items that did not exceed in most cases land, primitive tools, some money, a little family house, and at times, claims of knowing the truth about life, death and the universe. Two and a half centuries ago, man moved from the traditional agricultural age to the more advanced and complicated industrial age, leading him to become more materialistic and possessive. As a result, private ownership expanded to include, in addition to what the agricultural man has, industrial plants and capital, technological knowledge, and many other things usually used to enhance life comfort, facilitate travel, and expand the range of recreational and entertainment activities. As the knowledge age advances, man's desire to own more wealth has increased, and materialism has become the ultimate source of individual satisfaction of the knowledge man.

With every subsequent age in which man lived, the wealth and power gaps between the haves and have-nots have widened, causing the socioeconomic gaps separating the rich from the poor to deepen. As a consequence, the old cultural traditions and values that usually tie members of society together begin to fracture, forcing each group, often unconsciously, to develop a different culture and live its life in isolation from the other. While the poor in most societies are still attached to community life and worry about daily livelihood, the rich have

joined a growing global elite with its own culture, and are getting wealthier and more powerful and often ruthless with every day passes.

The absence of the institution of private property in the pre-agricultural times made societies largely classless, and that helped them avoid the experience of exploitation and slavery. But when man began to build settlements and farm the land, private ownership emerged and began to transform itself into a socioeconomic and sociopolitical institution that divided society into two major classes, a rich class of landlords, and a poor class of small peasants and slaves. Exploitation, as a consequence appeared, allowing the rich to enslave the poor and acquire more power at their expense. The industrial age expanded the range of economic activities and, as a result, caused the creation of a relatively large class that was neither rich nor poor. Due to its social status and economic and political weight, the middle class played a constructive societal role, facilitating social mobility and limiting the power of capitalists to exploit the poor and powerless. However, the middle class has failed to slow down the socioeconomic gaps separating the three classes from one another. And with the advent of the knowledge age and the discrediting of socialism, western governments in general relaxed regulations, giving the rich the freedom to pursue their material goals and exploit every opportunity and everyone in sight. And to justify their deeds, the rich and powerful began to blame the poor for their poverty and miserable life conditions as if discrimination and neglect and lack of adequate education and equal opportunity do not matter.

This means that every society was more materialistic than the previous one and more inclined to exploit other people for the sake of money and power and thus less fair. In fact, at every turn in human history, wealthy individuals, groups and nations have resorted to sheer power to suppress the other and discriminate against them, employing economic and military power to exploit the powerless and impoverish the poor, without much regard to human values or morality. So, every step toward more materialism and power is in itself a step away from the values of equality, justice, fairness and respect for human rights and dignity.

Since economic development relies heavily on scientific advancement and technological innovations and capital accumulation, education and creativity have become major sources of

societal wealth and individual satisfaction. People, to work hard, acquire more wealth and get the satisfaction they aspire for, need to feel that they can keep most of the money they earn. If the wealth of a nation were to be distributed equally among all citizens, no one would probably work for anyone else, causing the economy to stagnate. So, the absence of the material incentive would undermine individual drive to excel and make more money, and retard societal development in general. As a matter of fact, private property, both material and intellectual, have contributed substantially to everything man has accomplished in life, and therefore, it is expected to stay with us for as long as life continues on our planet. Nevertheless, private property and personal wealth and the power they generate should be regulated and directed toward enriching the life of society as a whole, and not be used to exploit the poor and weak, and deny them their legitimate economic, political, social and cultural rights.

The concentration of power in the hands of a small political and economic and media elite has enabled the rich to confiscate most of the rights of the poor and powerless, in violation of the democratic principles, human rights laws, and ethical standards. The last half a century has shown that as the number of the super rich increases, the number of the poor explodes. Meanwhile, greed, jealousy and envy have intensified leading the rich to ignore the ethics of fairness and justice, while forcing the poor to ignore honesty and, at times, dignity as well. Consequently, the rich driven by greed and envy, and the poor driven by need and jealousy have emerged as major forces motivating people to work, invest, compete, cheat, and sometimes steal to get ahead. By the time the knowledge age arrived, interests rather than values had become the core of the organizing principles of individual lives and socioeconomic relations.

Today, all societies seem to experience a dramatic decline in the influence of traditional values, business ethics and community spirit that governed the life of previous societies for generations. Although many forces could be blamed for instigating this development, the overall societal movement toward individualism and materialism on the one hand, and the slow abandonment of spiritualism and collectivism on the other are the major forces that stand behind the retreat of traditional values and ethics. While the rich individuals and societies

compete hard to acquire as much material things as possible, the poor individuals and societies try harder to imitate the rich but do little to acquire more knowledge and reclaim their rights. As a consequence, more emphasis is being placed on consumption and the appearance of wealth than on education and the essence of living a meaningful and productive life.

Joseph Schumpeter argued more than half a century ago that the most damaging consequences of capitalism are the negative effects it has on the values that support the social order in society. (Schumpeter: *Capitalism, socialism and Democracy*, 1950) But what Schumpeter seems to have failed to notice is that cultures have a great capacity to adapt, and that values and traditions are able to transform themselves to accommodate economic and technological change. Values that prevailed during the 1950s did not fully disintegrate, and the social order they had supported at the time did not collapse; new values emerged slowly and a new social order formed gradually, creating new, rather different sets of sociocultural, socioeconomic and sociopolitical relationships compatible with the new economy. Meanwhile, the excesses of the new wave of materialism associated with the advancement of industrial capitalism forced society to intervene and enact new laws to make the system less exploitative and more responsible to the common good. Meanwhile, the need of capitalists to interact with their workers and often bargain with them in good faith had facilitated the emergence of a more equitable social order peacefully.

In the knowledge age, the socioeconomic gaps and sociocultural divides that separate classes from one another have been growing wider and deeper every day, while the state is getting weaker and less able to play its traditional role in ensuring fairness and equal opportunity. Meanwhile, a rich class determined to strengthen its independence and accumulate more wealth, has hindered attempt to build a new social order compatible with the economic imperatives of the new age. As a result, the need for a social order capable of balancing the relationships between the rich and powerful on the one hand, and the poor and powerless on the other has not been met. While budgets for social and educational programs are being cut or remain inadequate, taxes on the rich are being reduced and the poor is being

isolated and neglected. Failure to rebalance class relations will ultimately lead to social unrest and possibly violence.

Under the old capitalistic system, the rich had concentrated their efforts on expanding manufacturing that drove economic growth and created millions of jobs, the super rich of today are concentrating their efforts on creating financial products that do not contribute to economic growth or create jobs. The first class, because it generated its wealth from industry, had to interact with millions of workers on daily basis; and as a consequence, it became aware of the need to ensure the welfare of its employees and the development of friendly communities to host its operations. The new rich class, in contrast, does not interact with workers or even with ordinary people because it derives its wealth from dealing in virtual products within virtual communities away from the eyes of the public. And due to their particular lifestyles and interests and interconnectedness, the super rich have developed a unique global culture having its own values, traditions, ethics, language and even vocabulary that others have difficulty understanding. And because each of its members has a house everywhere and no home anywhere, they have become a group of aliens having no loyalty to any place or nation or ideology; the only god they know and worship day and night is money. And to remain faithful to that god, they are willing to manipulate, cheat, steal, exploit and conspire against everyone to get closer to him. Having gained a lot of wealth and power, the super rich are employing money to influence politics and corrupt politicians and ensure the continuation of the prevailing unjust social order.

As a consequence of these developments, the rich and super rich have shown little regard for community life, and almost no interest in the tragic life conditions of the poor of the world. Nevertheless, the poor and powerless, despite their miserable life conditions, are not expected to revolt soon to reclaim their rights and force the creation of a new social order. During eras of civilizational transformations ordinary people usually get confused, lose their sense of direction, become more conservative and inward looking, and seek hope and comfort in religious teachings and traditional values that discourage change, dampen expectations, and encourage contentment.

Every system based on materialism and interests only, regardless of its nature and objectives, is unjust; and every unjust system is inefficient because it does not provide for equal opportunity. And in the absence of equal opportunity, the majority of people lose many of their rights, especially the right to discover their talents and develop their capabilities and improve the quality of their lives without having to abdicate their dignity. Unjust systems tend also to concentrate wealth and power in the hands of the few, strip the middle class of the resources it needs to maintain its social position and sociopolitical role, and impoverish a large segment of society, leaving the poor in distress. On the other hand, every economic system that is inefficient is also unjust because it wastes natural and human resources and distributes benefits unfairly among participants in the production process.

When an economic or political or social system fails to be just and efficient, society intervenes sooner or later to restructure the system or replace the prevailing sociopolitical order. This means that for societal systems to survive they have to be economically efficient and socially just and politically fair. Cultural values of honesty, integrity, responsibility and fairness have the capacity to strengthen any system, foster social peace, and improve the chances of material and non-material progress. In contrast, systems that ignore such values are unable to respond to people's needs and aspirations and, therefore, they are destined to fail and die either a natural or violent death.

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