

Culture of Consumerism

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The establishment of human settlements in the wake of the agricultural revolution about ten thousand years ago enabled man to produce more food and provided him with the time to think and contemplate. As a consequence, five major concepts emerged: the idea of progress, wealth, wealth accumulation, savings, and excess consumption. As man produced more, he began to save some and consume more. Rain, which usually prevents hunters from hunting and farmers from farming, 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 was slowly emerging as a means of production, a status symbol, and an instrument of power.

The industrial revolution, which occurred in the second half of the 18th century, revolutionized the way products were made and created millions of new jobs, forcing countless families to relocate to industrial cities. As a result, it caused a deep sociocultural and socioeconomic transformation of industrial society, dividing it into three major classes; an upper or leisure class, a middle class, and a working or lower class. However, within a hundred years or so, the 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 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 create more jobs.

The post-WWII era witnessed the production of millions of cars, the development of malls, and the appearance of a culture of mass consumption. Advancements in

transportation and communications systems, and cheap energy helped popularized that culture and spread it to all corners of the globe, causing peoples' desires to be disconnected from their real needs, and their behavior from their indigenous cultures. People got obsessed with owning material things, not knowing that material things seldom translate into happiness or enhance 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; and
4. The development of powerful media promoting all types of goods and services while pushing people to buy them.

Since the culture of the rich 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 rich and adopt their lifestyles. And because the majority of them do not have the financial means to live the life of the rich, 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 sacrifice necessities for the sake of luxuries they do not actually need. As someone put succinctly, *"You work in a job you hate, to buy stuff you don't need, to impress people you don't like.* 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.

Commercialization caused a drastic shift in culture, leading people to move away from values of family, community, spirituality and social responsibility, and toward individualism, competition, and materialism. On the other hand, the media worked hard to separate need

from desire, making every desire a need, while creating new needs people never felt they had before. During the Second World War years, for example, the American industry was busy building tanks, ships and airplanes to support the war, 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. As soon as the war ended, attention shifted to producing the promised goods, causing people to stand in lines for days to get them; just like the hype that accompanied the introduction of the I-phone few years ago. Emphasis on crime and terrorism has created a need for security systems and services and built a worldwide industry of more than a hundred billion dollar. Consumerism is driven by the trillions of dollars spent annually on advertising to create a universal desire to follow trends and keep up with the rich and powerful. And as conspicuous consumption became the norm, greed, envy, social irresponsibility, and corruption became prominent feature of the new culture, causing the gap between rich and poor to widen. By 2005, the wealthiest 20% of the world's population accounted for 77% of total consumption; the poorest 20% just 1.5%. And while the first group owned 87% of all cars, the second owned less than 1%.

In times of economic recessions and financial stress, people rediscover the virtues of savings and traditional values. But to undermine 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 must recognize the limits of their means and be content to live within the limits dictated by their abilities to produce. *If you are content, it does not matter how much you have because you will always have enough; if you are not content, it does not matter how much you have because you will never have enough.*

Arabs, who joined the culture of consumerism with passion, were able to separate not only need from desire, but also consumption from production. While some Arabs live today on income derived from oil they have little to do with its production, others live largely on transfer payments sent by nationals working in other countries to support family members

at home. The problem Arabs face therefore is more complicated than the one facing the West; it requires the restructuring of Arab culture as we know it today.

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 crises. While it enabled the greedy to manipulate the old and 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 the law to govern the socioeconomic evolution of societies in the age of economic and cultural globalization.*

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