



Materialism in Historical Perspective

Abstract This chapter focuses on explaining the role of materialism in society; materialism seems to have lately acquired the role claimed by religion in a traditional agricultural society. People are rich and poor, not because God and religion had ordained it as old societies believed, but because economics and knowledge and culture and greed have determined it. Man, consequently, is seen as the master of his fate, and that neither God nor religion has anything to do with his lot in life.

Keywords Materialism · God · Religion · Community · Ghettos · Poverty · Property · Middle class · Values · Socialism · Capitalism · Democracy · Justice · South Korea · Saudi Arabia

Materialism has lately acquired the role claimed by religion in agricultural society; it has become the major driving force in life. People are rich and poor, not because God and religion had ordained it as old societies believed, but because economics, knowledge and culture have determined it. Man, consequently, is seen as the master of his own fate, and neither God nor religion has anything to do with his lot in life. In the meantime, individualism has become the philosophy of the knowledge age, causing poverty and community and even nation to become minor issues of no particular concern to the elites controlling the economic and infomedia

processes. As a result, national cultures are being divided into subcultures, national societies are gradually disintegrating into sub-societies and cultural ghettos, and the “national interest” is fast becoming a vague concept that is hard to define and harder to understand and relate to.

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 assets are available, desirable, and reachable. In tribal times, man had very little things to acquire, because he was always on the move and could not carry most things he would have liked to own. But when man began to build and live in permanent agricultural settlements, the institution of private property appeared and caused wealth to become a major source of power shaping social relations and social structures. Meanwhile, the hamlets and villages which man settled in enabled him to own and enjoy some material things.

However, private property remained simple throughout the agricultural age; it did not exceed a piece of land, primitive tools, some money, and a little family house. About 250 years ago, man moved from the agricultural to the industrial age, leading him to become more materialistic and possessive. Consequently, private property expanded to include industrial plants, tangible assets, technological gadgets, and things usually used to enhance life comfort and expand and diversify the range of recreational activities open to people. As the knowledge age advances, man’s desire to own more wealth has increased, and materialism has become the ultimate source of individual satisfaction and social status. This has enabled the wealthy to become more powerful and socially respected than the religious and political men of decades ago.

The absence of the institution of private property in tribal times made society classless, and that helped its members to avoid exploitation and slavery. But after the building of agricultural settlements and farming the land, private property was transformed into a socioeconomic force that divided society into two classes, a rich class of landlords, and a poor class of small peasants and slaves. Consequently, exploitation appeared, allowing the rich to enslave the poor and acquire more wealth and power at their expense. The industrial age expanded the range of economic activities, which facilitated the creation of a relatively large middle class. Due to its social status and economic weight, the middle class was able to play a constructive societal role, facilitating mobility socially, politically, and economically.

But with the discrediting of socialism, the move of China toward capitalism, and the arrival of the knowledge age, change in the major Western states began to accelerate. Most states moved to relax financial and trade regulations, giving the rich and large corporations the freedom to pursue their economic and social goals, dismantle labor unions and exploit every opportunity and everyone in sight. As a result, the middle class began to lose its power and social and political influence. To justify their deeds, the rich began to blame the poor for their poverty and bad living conditions, as if discrimination and lack of adequate education and equal opportunity do not matter.

The concentration of power in the hands of a small political, economic, and media elite has enabled the rich to confiscate most of the rights of the poor and powerless, in violation of the principles of democratic and human rights. In the meantime, greed, jealousy, and envy intensified in every society, leading the rich to ignore the ethics of fairness and justice, while forcing the poor to ignore honesty and, at times, dignity to satisfy their desires. Consequently, the rich driven by greed and lust for money and power; and the poor driven by need and jealousy, and lust to acquire social status by owning some of the gadgets that the rich own have caused evil inclinations to become major forces motivating most people to work, invest, compete, cheat, deceive and sometimes steal to get ahead.

Today, all societies are experiencing a dramatic decline in the influence of values, business ethics, and the community spirit that governed the lives of preindustrial societies for generations. Although many forces could be blamed for causing this unhealthy development, the overall movement toward individualism and materialism on the one hand, and the abandonment of spiritualism and collectivism on the other are the major forces that stand behind the retreat of traditional values and ethics. “While rich individuals try hard to acquire more material things, most poor people 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 production and education and the essence of living meaningful and productive lives.”¹

Joseph Schumpeter argued more than 60 years ago that the most damaging consequences of capitalism are the negative effects it has on the values that support the social order in society.² “But what Schumpeter had failed to notice is that cultures have a great capacity to adapt, and that values are able to transform themselves and accommodate economic and technological change associated with capitalism. The values that prevailed

in the 1950s did not disintegrate, and the social order they supported did not collapse suddenly; rather, new values emerged slowly, and a new social order formed gradually, creating new socioeconomic and sociopolitical relationships compatible with a mature industrial economy. However, the new values came to justify the new reality and thus to side with the rich and powerful. But the excesses of materialism induced by the advancement of industrial capitalism forced society to intervene and enact new laws that made the system less exploitative and more respectful of the common good.”³ Meanwhile, capitalists’ need to interact with workers and bargain with them in good faith, was instrumental in facilitating the emergence of a rather equitable social order which most Western societies enjoyed for three to four decades, ending with the transition from the industrial age to the knowledge age in the mid-1990s.

Ideas, ideological convictions, traditions, and values on the one hand, and science, technologies, institutions, and interests on the other have had a competitive relationship throughout history. Wherever beliefs, values, traditions, and ideological convictions dominate, freedom is restricted, and technologies, institutions, and economies are used primarily as tools to foster ideology and enhance the power of its leadership. Iran, North Korea and Saudi Arabia are examples of states where technology and economy are used to tighten the ruling elites’ grip on power and hinder sociocultural and socioeconomic transformation. In contrast, wherever institutions, technologies, interests, and science dominate, freedom prevails but social justice often suffers. Therefore, reducing the influence of traditional values and ideological convictions has become a prerequisite for meaningful societal transformation and moving toward freedom. On the other hand, meaningful socioeconomic change to reduce the influence of the rich and powerful has become a prerequisite for creating just societies.

When social life is largely static, ideological convictions can and often do change living conditions; but when social life is largely dynamic, conditions can and often do change ideological convictions. In the knowledge age, where change is unstoppable, changing living conditions are destined to shape and reshape convictions without interruption. Therefore, human values and belief systems are destined to change and end the reign of ideology and the terror of ideological leaders. However, the road to upending the terror of ideology is expected to be long and hazardous; Islamic radicalism and anti-globalization in the East, and anti-emigrant and racial discrimination in the West suggest that restoring social peace

at the national level and balance of economic power at the global level is difficult; causing the world's poor to suffer most. The election of President Trump who imposed tariffs on China, and Britain's exit from the European Union show that globalization is retreating, and the old world order is disintegrating, and this means that the nation state needs to adjust its policies to reflect this reality. All states should move vigorously to change the global social order to be just and sustainable.

Until a few decades ago, able and charismatic leaders have symbolized the convictions that left a lasting impact on the lives of most people. However, no leader could claim greatness and lead unchallenged without being associated with an ideology or unusual but convincing convictions. This is why the recent decline in the role of ideology has been associated with a decline in the influence of political leaders. The future therefore is unlikely to witness the appearance of a great leader or a grand ideology able to change the course of history in a meaningful way. Historical records seem to suggest that no nation had been able to enjoy freedom of expression and institute democratic traditions and respect for human rights under the rule of charismatic leaders claiming greatness or divine authority. Charisma in society has always been in conflict with freedom and institutional bureaucracy because the latter works to enforce the law, not to promote leaders. In societies still living in preindustrial times, institutional bureaucracy is very weak, allowing political leaders to be absolutists. Absolute rulers, remarked Ottaviano Fregoso five centuries ago, are "always finding themselves obeyed and almost adored with such reverence and praise... They are subject to such boundless self-esteem that they take no advice from others,"⁴ and therefore they have no respect for the rights of anyone of their subjects.

Knowledge in the past had been more spiritual and human than materialistic, more liberal than conservative, and more pluralistic than exclusive and ideological. Due to these unique characteristics, knowledge was able to play a constructive role in helping the poor and the needy, solving social and economic problems, and inspiring change and progress. In contrast, the bulk of knowledge in the new age has become more materialistic than anything else; it is composed primarily of technological gadgets and information and computer programs and applications. While such products and information have high economic returns, they have little spiritual and humanistic returns; they tend to encourage individualism and reinforce greed and consumerism. In addition, they make information subject to manipulation by the media and other social actors

to suit every strain of thought and business concern. As a consequence, the new knowledge and the people who produce it and the elite who control it have become less committed to humanistic causes. Therefore, to address the daunting challenges facing humanity, intellectuals and thinkers need to be conscious of the changing nature of knowledge and the socioeconomic developments that engulf our lives.⁵

This makes it clear that every society in history has been more materialistic than the preceding one, and more inclined to exploit other people for the sake of wealth and power. In fact, at every turn in our social history, wealthy individuals, groups, and nations have resorted to power to suppress others and discriminate against them, employing economic and military power and violence to exploit the powerless and impoverish the poor. So, every step toward more materialism power, and individualism is a step away from the values of equality, social justice, fairness, freedom, and respect for human rights and the dignity of man.

Since economic development relies heavily on scientific discoveries and technological innovations and capital accumulation, education and creativity have become major sources of wealth. People, to work hard and 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 divided equally among all citizens, no one would probably work for anyone else, causing the economy to stagnate. So, without the material incentive individual drive to excel would be hampered, and societal development would be retarded. Nevertheless, private property and wealth and the power they generate should be regulated and directed toward enriching the collective life of people, not used by the powerful as tools to exploit the poor and weak and deny them their social, cultural, economic, political, and human rights.

NOTES

1. Mohamed Rabie, *A Theory of Sustainable Sociocultural and Economic Development*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, 77.
2. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, 1950.
3. Mohamed Rabie, *Saving Capitalism and Democracy*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, 57.

4. Mohamed Rabie, *Global Economic and Cultural Transformation*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, 77.
5. Ibid, p. 186.