

The Bottom Line

Unfortunate Side Effects of Capitalist Culture

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**Vernon Series in Critical Perspectives
on Social Science**



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Chapter 1

Capitalism and society

Introduction

This book is about the influence of the capitalist economic system on cultural values and rules here and abroad. One basic assumption that informs this work is that the globalized economic system is based on rational, but necessarily amoral goals and values, while the social and cultural world of human interactions is not. For example, remember when you were a child you learned that all human life was precious? Well, how precious? The answer matters and it's not useful to simply claim that it's priceless. For one thing, the value determines how much spending the government will require from businesses in the form of regulations and safety standards to prevent a human death. This value is calculated by many government agencies in the U.S. and varies, but has generally increased over time. In 2011, for example, the U.S. Transportation Department valued a human life at around \$6 million to justify new regulations for the automotive industry (Applebaum, 2011). Businesses also make these types of calculations, but often use different valuations and for other purposes. One American car manufacturer, for example, estimated that a human life was worth about \$200,000, in the context of a wrongful death associated with their product. In that case, one of the largest American auto manufacturers knew for several decades that the placement of the fuel tank in one particular model created an unreasonable risk of exploding in the event of a rear collision (Geyelin, 1999). Internal memos released into evidence in 1998 showed that the company estimated that deaths resulting from post-collision fuel-tank fires would cost the company \$2.40 per car, based on an estimate that each life "has a value of \$200,000." Other memos showed that the company had developed an improved design for protecting the gas tank in collisions, but would cost the company \$8.59 per car. The company executives decided not to make the improvement.

We recognize that corporations are guided by rational values and tend to make these kinds of quantifiable calculations in order to reduce risk, manage costs, generate profits, and promote growth.

But if unchecked, such analyses suggest a dark and dangerous future when many pro-business advocates argue against any regulations at all. The problem here is not capitalism as an economic system – it is surely the most efficient system for the production and distribution of goods and services. But the economic system has no role to play in the civic, moral, or personal circumstances of human life without degrading those circumstances. The question posed by many scholars like the philosopher Michael Sandel is whether some aspects of human life are immune to economic calculation. In other words, whether there are some things that money can't buy (Sandel, 2012). For example, during the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s, entrepreneurs saw an opportunity to capitalize on the high mortality rates among victims by investing in viatical settlements. Viatical settlements involve the sale of a person's life insurance policy once they become chronically or terminally ill. Basically, an insured victim gets an immediate cash payout by naming the investor as the beneficiary of the policy, and the investor agrees to pay for medical care until the victim's death. In 1989, two investment firms specifically targeted individuals with advanced cases of AIDS for viatical settlements; by 1994, the industry had grown to some 60 firms (Atkinson & Gilkeson, 1998). The risk for the investor was how long the AIDS victim lived; the longer they survived the less profit the investor would realize. In this industry, the inescapable conclusion is that the investor has a financial interest in the prompt death of the insured. "There have been some phenomenal returns, and there have been some horror stories where people live longer," said the president of one viatical company (quoted in Sandel, 2012). My argument isn't with the fact that this happens but that too many of us consider this to be a normal part of life. My concern is that if the market continues to rationalize these sorts of relationships between people, where one person's illness is another person's investment opportunity, then the logical conclusions are harrowing: Free markets for kidneys and other organs, various forms of slavery or indentured servitude, predatory for-profit healthcare. The problem is that the economic marketplace is morally neutral at best, since value is calculated in monetary terms, and this means that the further the market reaches into our civic and personal spaces, the less influence that moral and social values will have. This, I contend, is just one of the unfortunate side-effects of capitalist culture.

I argue in this book that the globalized capitalist economic system has become increasingly efficient in terms of scale and scope, but has also become less humane in many regards; less connected to human needs and concerns. It is an amoral system, and concerned with profits and growth, even when it tries to convince us of its beneficence and humanity. The general premise of this book is that the globalized capitalist economic system, dominated by powerful corporations, is guided by instrumental rather than moral values, largely unconstrained, increasingly intrusive, and socio-politically influential enough to alter our cultural rules and values in ways that are problematic at best. I also emphasize that the blame for these outcomes is not simply due to the capitalist economic system but because of its development alongside a process described as the *rationalization of society*, an evolutionary process that began during the Industrial Revolution and continues today. It is the side-effects of this combination of capitalism and rationalism, the combination of science and technology used to maximize capitalist goals, that are too often damaging for the world and its people. In this book, we will explore these issues and their implications.

Of particular concern is the encroachment of economic interests into areas of human society that traditionally have been free from this type of encroachment, or at least only minimally influenced by profit motives; areas such as scientific research, the justice system, and the personal social spaces in which we live, including even our family relationships. I suggest that there is a slow but steady intrusion into these areas of human life that were once considered off-limits to naked economic incentives and calculations. In a sense, the idea of “mission creep,” the gradual expansion of objectives during the course of a military operation or bureaucratic goal, is similar to what I call “market creep,” which is the gradual intrusion of economic activity into new “markets” that were previously considered non-economic in nature. This intrusion is the natural result of the economic system’s relentless need for expansion and is a completely trivial characteristic of capitalism as such. However, this process does not necessarily involve any concern with social responsibility or public welfare, which means that the economic system is essentially penetrating the cultural barriers that have traditionally separated economic from non-economic realms of human life. This intrusion puts even the idea of America as a free and democratic society increasingly at risk, as economic stakeholders meddle in the political and cultural areas of society in ever more crea-

tive ways to further their own enrichment, sometimes at the expense of the public.

Furthermore, the vast capitalist economic system is in many ways increasingly disconnected or disembedded from the contexts and regulations of traditional social relations. Most of us remember when Mitt Romney, the 2012 Republican presidential nominee, claimed that *corporations are people*. I suspect that he was attempting to humanize the face of corporations in general, but his words reminded many of us of the strange situation in which corporations have various rights and privileges but remain relatively free from the corresponding obligations and sanctions that constrain individual human actions. And if corporations are people, then they are extremely powerful people, since the Supreme Court's *Citizen's United* ruling recognized money as speech, allowing corporations to spend virtually unlimited amounts of money to support their preferred candidates in political elections. In fact, the economic power concentrated in the hands of nongovernment economic stakeholders in pursuit of profit creates a number of dangerous problems. According to the Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, for example, we are currently suffering a kind of existential crisis in western societies, one in which power, "the ability to do things," has become divorced from politics, which is "the ability to decide how things should be done" (2013).

On the one hand, there are powers liberated from political control, while on the other hand, we have politics that is suffering from a chronic shortage of power... power released from political control is capable of guiding itself by its own interests (2013).

These developments lead to the conclusion that the economic system is in some ways fully entangled in our day to day lives in ways that are troubling, but at the same time it is unconstrained by many of our social rules and values. This is not a new phenomenon, and many social theorists have warned about this problem since the time of the Industrial Revolution, but few societies have figured out how to solve this problem without sacrificing either civil liberties or the benefits of technical innovation. The globalized economic system is ultimately made up of individuals exercising their rights around the world, and this freedom has led to remarkable creativity. But in some ways, the economic system has created an alternate reality for itself, where freedom equates to an insatiable quest for profit, and innovation is often aimed at developing more successful

forms of influence over an unsuspecting public. As the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu described it, modern evolution “enabled the economy eventually to be constituted as... a separate universe, governed by its own laws (the laws of self-interested calculation and unfettered competition for profit)” (2005, p. 7).

Market Logic

Worse than a system that is entangled in our lives yet exempt from our social rules and values, however, is one that is *predatory*, entangled, and exempt. Consider, for example, the idea of prison privatization. What would it mean for a country that already imprisons more of its citizens than any other country on Earth to establish a for-profit prison system, where corporations and wealthy investors try to maximize profits by incarcerating as many people as possible while minimizing the costs? Sounds scary, right? But it’s already happening, right here in America. The private prison industry has been around since the late 1980s but since then has consolidated to the point that only four companies control over 90% of the business (Fields, 2011). In fact, some critics point out that the market is now effectively an oligopoly. As an example of a growing trend, in 2011 a Cleveland newspaper reported that Ohio had sold one of its state prisons to Corrections Corporation of America (CCA), the largest of the for-profit enterprises (Fields, 2011). As part of the agreement, according to the report, the state guaranteed a minimum occupancy rate of 90% for at least three months or would have to pay stiff penalty fees to CCA. In fact, several states have had similar agreements with these companies, with minimum occupancy rates of more than 90%. What are the implications of a system where states are being confronted with choices such as whether to imprison more people to meet incarceration quotas or pay penalties to private companies? The solution for Ohio was apparently to increase incarcerations. An independent investigation by the Ohio chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union in 2013 found that several courts in Ohio started jailing people when they failed to pay their criminal fines (Alcuohio.org, 2013). This is a modern-day version of debtors’ prison, according to the ACLU report. “The use of debtors’ prison is an outdated and destructive practice that has wreaked havoc upon the lives of... thousands... throughout Ohio.” The conditions in that particular Ohio prison also degraded, possibly due to the revenue-enhancing efforts of the private owners. Within a year of its privatization, according to the ACLU, the

prison failed several inspections, and the investigation found broken facilities, overcrowding, and a forty percent increase in violence in the prison (2013).

Even worse, the for-profit prison concept leads to new forms of corruption. What does it say about our society when judges receive millions of dollars in kickbacks from for-profit prison companies for routinely sending children as young as ten to private youth detention centers for “crimes” like trespassing in an empty building or making fun of a school principal via social media? Yes, that happened too. Two former juvenile court judges were convicted in 2009 of racketeering in a case where the judges sent thousands of youth offenders to for-profit detention centers in Pennsylvania in exchange for millions of dollars in illicit payments from the owners of those detention centers (Tavernise & Hurdle, 2011).

The for-profit prison model may represent a particularly extreme form of economic innovation. But as a more mainstream example, consider the for-profit healthcare industry in America. It is well established that Americans pay more for their healthcare than any other country in the world, even though American health outcomes are no better than in other countries (OECD, 2013). The healthcare industry in America can justifiably be called an *illness* industry, since the industry profits from charging sick people as much as possible for medicines and procedures. A New York Times article reported some of the exaggerated prices Americans pay for vital asthma medicines, for example.

Pulmicort, a steroid inhaler, generally retails for over \$175 in the U.S., while pharmacists in Britain buy the identical product for about \$20 and dispense it free of charge to asthma patients... Rhinocort Aqua, a prescription drug that was selling for more than \$250 a month in Oakland pharmacies last year... costs under \$7 in Europe, where it is available over the counter (Rosenthal, 2013).

These price differences may make good business sense, corporations want to increase profits whenever possible, but in the case of healthcare we are dealing with a public good and life-or-death issues for millions of people. In such a situation, putting profits ahead of the public good on such a basic level violates our shared human values and erodes the social bonds that connect us. Recent news coverage has pointed to the dramatic price increases in essential medications like the epinephrine injectors needed by people

with allergies, which increased six hundred percent since 2008, and insulin, needed by over six million diabetics in America alone, which has increased 700% in 20 years and has never been sold in generic form. In fact, even doctors who benefit from the American medical model are finding the need to warn against its excesses. For example, in a New York Times op-ed from 2014, two physicians at Harvard Medical School warned, "...financial forces largely hidden from the public are beginning to corrupt care and undermine the bond of trust between doctors and patients" (Hartzband & Groopman, 2014).

Cases like these point to more than simple economic propositions. The fact that many of us would consider the for-profit prison model an acceptable and even "normal" business innovation, or that American businesses sell asthma medications for thirty times more than what people in other countries pay, are indications of a deeper cultural issue. This is an issue of values, cultural resources that we rely on to differentiate right from wrong, and these values can be manipulated and altered by forces antagonistic to our most cherished social goals. In chapter 2 I explore the cultural and psychological components that make these manipulations possible. In Chapter 3 I explore the history of capitalism and the problems inherent with some of its aspects. But I want to be clear that I am not criticizing entrepreneurial success. Earning money through innovative business enterprises clearly is an acceptable and even admirable pursuit. However, those pursuits must be within the various boundaries created by our common values. But both these examples represent predatory economic strategies that allow business interests to profit from the poor, the socially marginalized, and the sick. These "customers" have little if any choice in the matter. Economic enterprises like for-profit prisons and predatory pharmaceutical corporations therefore represent the growing domination of certain cultural perspectives that benefit specific economic interests within society, even as the results of those benefits do harm to the larger community. My point is that the justifications for these economic developments are first rationalized and then normalized within the larger community through the power of mass media, political pressure, and even ideology, so that economic incentives and activities that were once considered unacceptable are now considered equal to or even elevated over other social concerns.

In addition to the perverse incentives and potential harm that specifically predatory business practices represent, there are signif-

icant problems with the most basic assumptions of consumption-based economies. The idea that a rising economic tide would lift all boats, to paraphrase John F. Kennedy, requires economic expansion and growth. Consumerism, the celebration of consumption and materialism that has become commonplace in our society, echoes the need for “newer, faster, better,” but this is a social phenomenon driven by an economic agenda, despite the fact that the traditional cultural values here in America were based on thrift and self-sufficiency. Later in this chapter, I describe the rise of rationalism and its implications for modern societies in terms of marketing and money. In Chapter 3 I will delve deeply into the processes by which corporate businesses began to transform American society into a society preoccupied with consumption - with comfort and bodily well-being, luxury, and acquisition - by promoting the idea that consumption equated to good citizenship. But for now, we should simply point out that the long-range implications of consumerism in general are a mixed blessing at best, and can be potentially devastating if they are not regulated and counterbalanced. For example, a 1998 report from the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) had this to say:

Today’s consumption is undermining the environmental resource base. It is exacerbating inequalities... If the trends continue without change — not redistributing from high-income to low-income consumers, not shifting from polluting to cleaner goods and production technologies, not promoting goods that empower poor producers, not shifting priority from consumption for conspicuous display to meeting basic needs — today’s problems of consumption and human development will worsen (UNDP, 1998, p.1).

Unfortunately, there are few institutions in this country that can offset the power of the powerful economic stakeholders and the consumption patterns that they rely on. Under the banner of free enterprise and liberal capitalism, the economic system in this country and others has become the 800-pound gorilla in our midst, and the joke goes like this: “Q: What’s that 800-pound gorilla doing in our living room? A: Whatever it wants.”

I am not arguing that some different sort of economic system should replace capitalism, nor am I suggesting that consumption is necessarily bad. In fact, that same U.N. report previously quoted has this to say on the first page: “Human life is ultimately nourished and sustained by consumption. Abundance of consumption is no

crime. It has, in fact, been the lifeblood of much human advance” (UNDP, 1998, p.1). I do, however, wish to point out some clear problems with some of the characteristics of the current system. In some ways, I suspect that economic stakeholders like corporations and the marketing industry they rely on, in their efforts to promote consumption, have simply gotten too successful. As the U.N. report clarifies, “The real issue is not consumption itself but its patterns and effects” (1998). And these patterns and effects have ramifications for society that reach psychological and cultural levels.

Modernity and the Rise of Modern Problems

At this point, we should begin to address the “modern” characteristics in our discussion of the globalized economic system, specifically the rise of rationalism and scientific thinking that blossomed in 17th century Europe. I will argue that the type of thinking that leads to decisions like the ones made by the car manufacturer in our earlier discussion, the decision to not repair a safety flaw because the loss of life would probably be less expensive, has its roots in this historic time. Here, I suggest, during the Age of Enlightenment and then the subsequent Industrial Revolution, is where the ideas that support an economic system that is unconstrained, intrusive, and most of all, efficient, take root.

First, it should be noted that the evolution of modern economic practices went hand-in-hand with several other major changes in the world, including the spread of democratic forms of government, scientific advances, and the elevation of education as a public good. Historically, however, the massive changes in the economic systems of industrialized societies since then have been part of a larger, more comprehensive evolutionary process encompassing all of humankind. Significantly, the theories that help explain human social evolution tend to start with the fundamental need for economic activity. In *The Rise of Anthropological Theory* (1968) and *Cannibals and Kings* (1977), for example, the American anthropologist Marvin Harris described a theory of social evolution that was based primarily on human consumption and production and emphasized the power of the economic system to shape human life. According to Harris, long-term social evolution is a continuing process of social action aimed at material adaptation to changing environmental situations. This theory, referred to as *cultural materialism*, suggests that human socio-cultural development is a process of finding the most efficient solutions to biological, psycho-

logical, and ecological problems experienced by all human beings and all cultures. Cultural materialism is an expansion on the theory known as historical materialism, first developed by the German philosopher Karl Marx, which argues that the material conditions of a society's modes of production fundamentally determine its organization and development.

...life involves before everything else eating and drinking, housing, clothing and many other things. The first historical act is thus the production of the means to satisfy these needs, the production of material life itself. And indeed this is a historical act, a fundamental condition of all history, which today, as thousands of years ago, must daily and hourly be fulfilled merely in order to sustain human life (Marx & Engels, 1970, p. 47).

Initial successes in the production of food and other necessities result in population growth, which results in depletion of resources, which, in turn, requires intensification of production and innovation (Harris, 1968). Periods of growth eventually create new challenges for human groups in terms of organization and production, and, in order to adapt to these changes, more efficient and complex structures and processes must be developed to meet the material needs of the expanding population. Innovation leads to new forms of technological intensification which result in new forms of environmental depletion, and these continuous processes of material adaptation lead to the continual reorganization of social structures.

Like Marx, Harris proposed a model of cultural change within a framework with three distinct levels: infrastructure, structure and superstructure. According to cultural materialism, a society's infrastructure, the material aspects of a society such as technology, the economy and reproductive factors, dominates the development of culture. The structures within a society are the organizational aspects such as kinship systems, and the organization of the political and economic systems, and the superstructure consists of ideological and symbolic aspects of society such as social roles and religion.

From this perspective, the technological and economic factors play the primary role in shaping society, and the values, norms, and practices of that society are determined and altered based on material needs and developments. We can easily see the role of technology behind major historical social changes: the first cultivation of plants and animals, the plow, the steam engine, and the

computer chip are the four most obvious innovations. In the earliest tribes of hunter-gatherers, which were often little more than extended families with shared norms and values dictated by the most powerful members of the group and then, eventually, tradition. In these first crude societies, cultures provided social cohesion based on traditional concepts of authority, worship, status, sacrifice, etc. But once these tribes learned how to herd the wild cattle and plant the seeds from the cassava or corn crops that they encountered on their nomadic wanderings, these groups expanded from small, nomadic hunter-gatherer tribes into larger, more stable and complex groups that raised crops and domesticated animals. Surpluses grew and trade became possible. Families expanded and kinship relations became more complex. Permanent settlements became possible since it was no longer necessary for people to follow the food supply. These large settlements expanded much more dramatically after the invention of the plow, which resulted in an even greater abundance of foods and goods, and made large cities possible because it freed some members of the group from being dedicated to the production of their own food. Surplus, in the form of extra food and trade goods, led to leisure time, more division of labor, and issues pertaining to the distribution of resources, which meant the use of policies and practices to organize and manage those resources. As things progressed, political and economic practices associated with the organization of these agricultural societies and their resources became more complex and, in many ways, better.

It is generally agreed that the modernization of industrialized production and the twilight of monarchist political systems ushered in the historical period known as *modernity*, and it traces back to the 17th century, to the beginning of the period known as the Age of Enlightenment and its optimistic view of science and progress. "Since the beginning of the modern era the prospect of a limitless advance of science and technology, accompanied at each step by moral and political improvement, has exercised a considerable hold over Western thought" (in Habermas, 1984, p. v). The concept of modernity and its ramifications is a well-developed area of interest. In fact, many experts in the field of sociology believe that sociology itself began as an effort to comprehend the process of modernization in industrialized Europe. We can define modernity as the patterns of social action linked to the rationalization of society and the industrialization of production. The process of modernization includes general characteristics such as the decline of small, tradi-

tional communities and the rise of large cities; the expansion of personal choice and individualism; increasing social diversity; and a future-oriented awareness of time (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). The Canadian psychologist Dan McAdams describes modernity as “the economic, political, and cultural systems spawned in the 19th and 20th centuries by the industrial revolution” and links modernity to the expansion of capitalism and markets, the increasing domination of science and technology, and the rising power of democratic states (McAdams, 1996).

Since about the seventeenth century, scientific progress has been continual. Although the greatest rate of technological progress for the average person occurred around the end of the 19th century when safe water supplies, telephones, automobiles, electric lighting, and home refrigeration developed in short order, we continue to benefit from general advances, especially communications, medical, and environmental technologies. We recognize these benefits as cultural in nature, stemming from a combination of two cultural elements: technology and ideology. As the American biologist and theorist E. O. Wilson suggests,

In contrast to widespread opinion, I believe that the Enlightenment thinkers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries got it mostly right. The assumptions they made about a lawful material world, the intrinsic unity of knowledge, and the potential for indefinite human progress are the ones we still take most readily to heart, suffer without, and find maximally rewarding as we learn more and more about the circumstances of our lives (1998).

But progress involves trade-offs, as we know, and many of these trade-offs have become problematic. In fact, the archaeologist Jared Diamond, in an article titled “The Worst Mistake in the History of the Human Race,” claimed that human history over the past million years has not been a history of progress at all, and cites research that suggests that the development of agriculture, “supposedly our most decisive step toward a better life, was in many ways a catastrophe from which we have never recovered” (1987). In particular, he identifies side effects of agriculture such as social and sexual inequality, disease and despotism. We assume that we’re better off than our ancestors, and that quality of life for most people has steadily improved throughout history. And we also assume that “our escape from this misery was facilitated only 10,000 years ago, when in different parts of the world people began to domesticate plants

and animals,” which marked the beginning of the agricultural revolution (Diamond, 1987). However, the assumption that the lives of primitive people improved when they switched from gathering to farming may be false. Hunter-gatherer societies enjoyed a better diet than farmers who “obtained most of their food from one or a few starchy crops.” Dependence on a limited number of crops created the risk of starvation if the crops failed. Agriculture led to a greater abundance of foods and goods, and made large cities possible, but this encouraged people to crowd together, which led to the spread of parasites and infectious disease. As Diamond’s research shows, societies that fail to maintain effective resource management systems eventually collapse, as have societies that cannot adapt to changing environmental conditions. Diamond’s warnings are particularly relevant today with the increasing problems associated with climate change becoming more and more obvious.

Yes, economic activity is a basic and necessary need in any society, but our need to push consumption beyond the essentials can lead to the paradoxical situation where economic success will eventually produce harmful environmental and social outcomes. The central question, of course, is how to manage these problems. One answer is to harness our collective will to reduce our levels of consumption, and thereby reduce our environmental impact. But this solution requires major changes, including cultural, political, as well as economic changes, and the globalized economic system is in many ways unconstrained by political will, and also has control of the media outlets that sway our cultural world. In fact, one of my major issues in this book is the imbalanced relationships among our society’s cultural, political, and economic systems. This again is not a new phenomenon, but one that gets less attention than I think it deserves. The economic historian Karl Polanyi has written extensively about this issue, and his concerns are worth noting. I will present Polanyi’s ideas more fully in Chapter 2, but for now it is worth noting that, according to Polanyi, one problem with modern capitalism is that the stuff of economic relationships, money and commodities, have come to dominate the other domains of human life, including political and social institutions, leading to increased risk and instability, and an erosion of well-being (2001). As Polanyi describes it, Instead of economy being embedded in social relations, social relations are embedded in the economic system (Polanyi, 2001, pg. 77).

This unbalanced relationship between economics and human life is enabled by a transformation of our cultural landscape and is not just an economic issue. As we shall see in later chapters, the modern capitalist economic system promotes materialism and consumption, but psychological research has consistently shown that people who develop strong materialistic values and organize their lives around extrinsic goals such as acquisitiveness and consumption report greater unhappiness in relationships, poorer moods and more psychological problems (Kasser, 2002). Yet this is specifically the message that the economic system sends us, that acquisitiveness and consumption are the paths to happiness.

Worse, the economic imperative of growth drives the search for new markets and new consumers, which means that the influence of the economic system has reached into personal spaces that have long-range cultural consequences. For example, the economic system increasingly influences even the psychological realms of childhood development and personal growth. In a 2005 article in the journal *Childhood*, the psychologist Beryl Langer addresses the effects of consumer capitalism on children's sense of identity. Commercial or popular, culture is an important source of symbolic material for children as they develop a sense of identity and self-concept. The games they play, the fantasies they indulge in, and the identities they mimic are all potential sources of meaning and value to a growing child. Unfortunately, the logic of consumerism means that the globalized economic system can recognize children only as consumers. Thus, according to Langer,

Children are increasingly socialized into the endlessly recurring cycle of fashion and obsolescence that fuels economic growth... the parameters of what children play and what they want to play with are increasingly set by decisions made in the design and marketing departments of global corporations (p. 267).

The problem is not that consumer capitalism and healthy social development are at odds in principle. However, Langer points out that this promotion of materialism means that "children's sense of sufficiency is thus continuously undermined, in that the moment of possession offers not closure but new objects of desire" (p. 268). Not surprisingly, a meta-analysis of psychological research showed that a negative relationship between materialism and well-being is universal, consistent across all types of people and cultures. Generally, the more people embrace materialistic values, the more they experience unpleasant emotions, depression and anxiety, and

physical health problems (Kasser, 2014). In the same way, the more materialistic people are, the less they experience pleasant emotions and feel satisfied with their lives.

The larger point is that this ability to motivate children and adults to participate in the “endlessly recurring cycle of fashion and obsolescence” is part of the evolution of the capitalist economic system, and it means that whatever problems we have now will increase along with the improvements in expertise, information processing, and efficiency of the system’s corporate stakeholders. Remember that two of the central tenets of capitalism are the pursuit of profits and expansion. As corporations study us and collect our data, we become increasingly susceptible to their influence. As the American philosopher Brian Epstein put it,

Increasingly, economic activity turns on collecting and mobilizing information about people... Google—whose business, after all, is directing people to documents written by people and tailoring advertisements to people—has over 35,000 employees, more than twice the 13,000 academic economists in the United States. And the marketing department of Procter and Gamble is larger than the sociology departments of all US universities combined. It is only a slight exaggeration to say that the world economy is transforming into a massive system for doing social science (2015, p. 2).

Technocracy and Instrumentality

The idea that the globalized economic system is transforming into a massive system for doing social science means that there will be increasing knowledge asymmetries and potential for manipulation (and corruption) among powerful stakeholders. Unfortunately, the existing technical requirements of running both complex economic and political systems and the increasingly bureaucratized way these systems work has meant that their administrative functions have already become separated from society’s cultural rules. For example, macroeconomic policies could not be understood in the same way that a household budget could be, and this meant that the public might have trouble grasping the details of modern economic issues that involve complexities like global trade or environmental concerns, creating a gap between large-scale economic and political action guided by experts and the day-to-day experiences of the public. For example, the idea that America’s welfare outlays are potentially ruinous for the future of the nation is a popular idea

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