

Holiday Season Hypocrisy

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Christmas is observed December 25 by Christians and others celebrating the spirit of the season while for those of the Eastern Orthodox faith the holiday falls on January 7. It's to honor the birth of Jesus Christ even though it's widely acknowledged not to be his birthday.

Along with its religious significance, the season is also for other celebratory events like winter festivals, parties, family get-togethers and Kwanzaa from December 26 - January 1 for Africans Americans to reconnect to their cultural and historical heritage. Jews as well celebrate the season with the Hanukkah Festival of Lights. It's to commemorate their struggle for survival, but for Jewish children it's their Christmas with gifts from parents like their Christian friends get.



Christmas is also the time when the national obsession to shop and consume reaches its zenith. It traditionally begins the day after Thanksgiving, runs through Christmas eve, and after the holiday continues into January with plenty of extra buying power from holiday gift cards, year-end bonuses and other resources gotten or borrowed. It's for everything people never knew they wanted until creative advertising wizardry made their lives incomplete without them.

Perhaps this single dominant trait characterizes American culture more than any other. It's a variant of the kind of consumerism economist/sociologist Thorstein Veblen called "conspicuous" in his 1899 book "The Theory of the Leisure Class." F. Scott Fitzgerald explained that "the very rich....are different from you and me." Veblen wrote about their spending habits and coined the phrase "conspicuous consumption." Today, it's called "keeping up with the Joneses" or consumerism, and it's practiced by status-seeking people obsessed with personal gratification. But not just by the rich. Most people, except the poor, do it and to excess.

The term "consumption" originated hundreds of years ago. Then, it referred to infectious tuberculosis or TB. But its original meaning is relevant in today's acquisitive society where consuming for essentials is worlds apart from gluttonous consumerism. This variant refers to overindulgent shopping and spending for things people buy irrespective of need but not

without consequences for themselves and society.

Untreated TB, or consumption, consumes its victims in a slow, painful death. Consumerism mimics it with its similarly harmful fallout: ecological destruction; unhealthy and unsafe consumer products; corporate empowerment; profits pursued over people; militarism and foreign wars; health, education and other essential needs neglected; and democratic decay in a corporatist state disdaining the public interest.

People take pride saying “when the going gets tough, the tough go shopping” – but not without consequences. The personal fallout is over-indebtedness millions can't handle in the wake of unexpected medical emergencies or loss of employment. The toll: since the early 1980s one in seven families forced into bankruptcy, over 2 million in 2005 alone (30% above 2004), and millions more ahead from unchecked borrow and binge-spending made worse by the subprime crisis.

Overindulgent spending is what clinicians call an obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). At its worst, it's pathologically characterized by obsessive, repetitive thoughts that need compulsive tasks and rituals to relieve. For addicted consumers, it's an obsession to shop and spend and a compulsion to buy and accumulate. In excess, it's clinically pathological and destructive when it causes bankruptcy.

In America and the West, tens of millions of otherwise normal people shop excessively for what they never knew they wanted until Madison Avenue mind manipulators convinced them. Economist Paul Baran described the process as making us “want what we don't need (all unessential consumer goods and services) and not....what we do (good health care, education, clean air and water, safe food, and good government providing essential services).”

Future insolvency is risked, but few consider the possibility until it's too late. It's worst at Christmas when it becomes a pathological orgy of frenzied spending dismissively called getting into the holiday spirit. Maybe for merchants, but not when bills come due with growing millions unable to pay them or needing more debt to delay for later what they can't handle now.

Institutionalized consumerism also plays into social control. It's empowered when people are focused on bread and circus distractions that include the sights and sounds of the season. Media theorist Neil Postman once called Americans the most over-entertained and under-informed people in the world and wrote about it in books like “Amusing Ourselves to Death.” Attracted to self-gratification and its reinforcing images, they're diverted from what matters most – challenging wars of aggression, loss of civil liberties and human rights, violations of law, gutted social services, environmental harm, and policies benefitting the privileged at the expense of beneficial social change.

Consumerism also lets corporate power prosper and grow. It feeds unfettered capitalism and out-of-control greed. It helps direct our tax dollars to a militarized state instead of going for essential social needs. It diverts the national wealth to an imperial juggernaut that consumers finance through overindulgence. The more we shop, the stronger it gets and is better able to exploit new markets, resources and cheap labor at the expense of the more expensive kind at home whose future consumption is endangered by today's self-gratifying excesses.

Adam Smith was capitalism's ideological godfather who was also concerned about concentrated wealth and wrote about it in "The Wealth of Nations." He explained an "invisible hand" of unseen forces worked best in a free market with many small businesses competing locally against each other. He contrasted them with concentrated mercantilism and wrote about the "merchants and manufacturers" who used their power to wreak "dreadful misfortunes" and grave injustices on the vast majority of people using the British East India Company as a case study example.

Today's monopoly capitalism would have been unimaginable in his day, but he'd recognize it. He wrote that throughout history we find the wreckage of the "vile maxim of the masters of mankind....All for ourselves and nothing for other people....unless government takes pains to prevent" this outcome. No invisible hand works in manipulated markets where governments sanction Smith's "vile maxim," and the greater good is nowhere in sight. Under neoliberal rules, capital wins, people lose, and consumerism makes things worse. It's most extreme at Christmas when shopping trumps the holiday's meaning and seasonal sights and sounds drown out everything else.

The toll is tragic. Whatever Christmas was, it no longer is, and our behavior corrupts it and the spirit of the man it honors. He spread it in deeds and teachings from his Sermon on the Mount and message to "turn the other cheek," love thy neighbor, not kill, and do unto others as you'd want them doing to you. The consumerist ethic glorifies receiving, not giving; condoning predatory capitalism and ignoring its harm; neglecting the greater good; sanctifying overindulgence while forgetting those most in need throughout the year. In the spirit of the season, thoughts should be on helping others and giving thanks. In an unfettered marketplace, it's impossible.

It's a sad testimony to a society obsessed with greed and gratification at the expense of beneficial social change. At Christmas, it defiles the holiday spirit and forgets the needy. For them, Christmas is "Bah Humbug," and Santa Scrooge - all take and no give.

New Year's Day

New Year's day is one week after Christmas and concludes the long holiday season. It starts after Thanksgiving, reaches a climax around Christmas, ebbs for a day and builds again for a final celebratory new year's welcome with more overindulgent eating, drinking, partying, and binge-shopping for nonessentials.

The new year is also a traditional time for resolutions that include some with merit like losing weight, quitting smoking and getting fit. Most are forgotten, and those most important never made: working for peace, good will toward others, loving thy neighbor, respecting everyone, and treating people as we want to be treated in a society of caring and sharing with equity and justice for all. Wouldn't that be a wonderful resolution for the new year. Long ago in simpler times before the old world became America, it was that way. It can be again, but wishing won't make it so.

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