

Material Questions

A mansionette is rising in a muddy field. It could be anywhere. It has more bedrooms than a small hotel and bathrooms big enough to make an emperor smile. It has rooms that hadn't even been invented a few decades ago (the media room, the great room), and one or two others that were seen only in the homes of the truly wealthy. It has a red brick façade that can't decide whether it is supposed to be a Georgian manor or a French chateau, and there are three dozen just like it within a few blocks.

That house stands at the crossroads of two increasingly debated public questions that figure prominently in this issue of the WQ: materialism and suburban sprawl. Just as the prosperity of the 1950s and '60s produced a wave of "small is beautiful" revulsion at the era's material excesses, the 1990s are giving birth to new complaints, reflected in the titles of books such as *Luxury Fever* and *The Overspent American*. Our very success has cast us into a fresh debate over the cultural consequences of capitalism. The debate is joined in several places in this issue, including the essays on materialism, William H. Whyte, and "America's Unending Revolution," as well as our review of *Luxury Fever* (p. 139) and the Periodical Observer's, "Railing against the Auto" (p. 105). Even G. John Ikenberry's essay, "Why Export Democracy?" addresses the question, for the democracy he has in mind is not only political in nature but economic as well. Open international markets, he argues, can lead to freer domestic markets and (eventually) politics in some of the world's darker corners.

The logic of this sturdy liberal principle that political freedoms follow on the heels of economic ones, once a subject of great controversy, now seems all but unassailable—though one may have to wait a long time and wade through a sea of troubles before those

political freedoms are finally won. And this understanding that capitalism promises not just economic but political freedoms helps account for its global appeal.

The fact that the socialist alternative has vanished, however, has added to the intensity of the new criticism of materialism, and guarantees that it will be no passing thing. In the international arena, the criticism takes the form of attacks on the worldwide wave of Nikes, rap music, and fast food spreading out like a cultural *tsunami* from American shores. At home, it is voiced as a concern over "quality-of-life" issues, such as sprawl, environmental degradation, wasteful consumerism, and overwork.

In a surprising reply, novelist Salman Rushdie, who, to put it mildly, had no previous reputation as an apologist for American culture, wrote recently that the *tsunami* critics missed the point: "Sneakers, burgers, blue jeans, and music videos aren't the enemy. If the young people of Iran now insist on rock concerts, who are we to criticize their cultural contamination? Out there are real tyrants to defeat. Let's keep our eyes on the prize." The prize he had in mind was freedom, and he suggested in a sophisticated way that a world that wants it may just have to swallow a few Big Macs. Freedoms—the freedom to speak out and the freedom to consume gooey masses of meat and vegetables, for instance—are not easily divisible.

It's not just freedoms that may be indivisible. Historians during the past decade or so have been compiling a great deal of evidence reminding us of what should be obvious, that commerce and culture, two different forms of creativity, are not only inseparable but mutually supportive. In a recent history of the Renaissance, for example, British writer Lisa Jardine showed how the efflorescence of that era was intimately



linked to its commercial vitality, how the acquisition of, say, a rare ancient manuscript was as much an act of conspicuous consumption as of intellectual curiosity. In other words, the animal spirits of acquisitiveness may be inseparable from those of cultural creativity. Jardine argues that “the world we inhabit today, with its ruthless competitiveness, fierce consumerism, restless desire for ever wider horizons, for travel, discovery and innovation, a world hemmed in by the small-mindedness of petty nationalism and religious bigotry but refusing to bow to it, is a world which was made in the Renaissance.”

Which brings us back to our mansionette. It represents something relatively new in the world that was made five centuries ago: the democratization of affluence. Affluence on a mass scale strained the conventions of wealth. In the Renaissance, and well into the 19th century, riches were restricted to a relative few and the strictures surrounding their disposition remained reasonably intact. “God nourishes them [Christians] to live, not to luxuriate,” John Calvin declared in the 16th century. But the prudential, self-denying embrace of the material world by Calvin, Martin Luther, and other Protestant reformers became in the hands of many of their later inheritors an ease with plenty, occasionally even a celebration of it. For many, religion’s reservations about wealth simply became irrelevant.

Secular attempts to grapple with the implications of widespread affluence have not been notably successful. This year marks the centennial of one of the first significant efforts in this vein, Thorstein Veblen’s *Theory of the Leisure Class*. Robert Frank’s new *Luxury Fever* strongly echoes Veblen’s complaint in its charge that Americans are caught up in an irrational, costly, and ultimately unsatisfying race of competitive spending that never ends. Frank advances a package of policy ideas—a heavy progressive tax on consumption used to subsidize an array of worthy undertakings, such as the reduction of air pollution—under the aegis of an unusual argument: it would make us all *happier*, he says. But should happiness, that most elusive human want, be an aim of policy? The sources of happiness seem

more various—including family, faith, work, and, yes, all those things we buy—and double-edged than such a view allows. How we cope with affluence and its many byproducts, from suburban sprawl to an alarmingly low rate of personal saving, is clearly going to preoccupy the United States for a long time to come. But most likely these issues will be addressed like other public questions, more modestly, in narrower terms and on a case-by-case basis.

One broad quality-of-life issue that deserves more sweeping attention is the impact of our affluent, acquisitive way of life on the character of Americans’ deliberations about public questions—our political quality of life. “Embourgeoisement,” as the social scientists call it, may be a prerequisite for democratic beginnings, but the American example seems to suggest that it can eventually become problematic for democracy. By most measures the richest nation in the world, and by any measure the most bourgeois, the United States also has the lowest rate of voter participation among the industrialized nations. (Only Switzerland, with a bourgeois character to challenge that of the United States and, perhaps significantly, a federal structure as strong as America’s, has a lower one.) And the U.S. rate, now down to about 50 percent, is dropping.

Yet another cause for concern is that participation in the United States varies far more widely by income level than it does in other Western countries, with the well-to-do turning out in much greater numbers than the poor. At the same time, even our wealthiest citizens do not match the *average* European commitment to this simplest of civic obligations, just barely beating out Britain’s total turnout of 71.4 percent and falling far short of overall participation in countries such as Austria and Denmark.

Is all of this an accident? Does the American pursuit of plenty impose some upper limit on political commitment? And are poorer people, deprived of the ability to make meanings in the marketplace, as James Twitchell argues elsewhere in this issue, somehow also deprived of a sense of political creativity? Questions like these may be the ultimate quality-of-life issues.

—Steven Lagerfeld