

Buyer's Remorse

by Daniel Akst

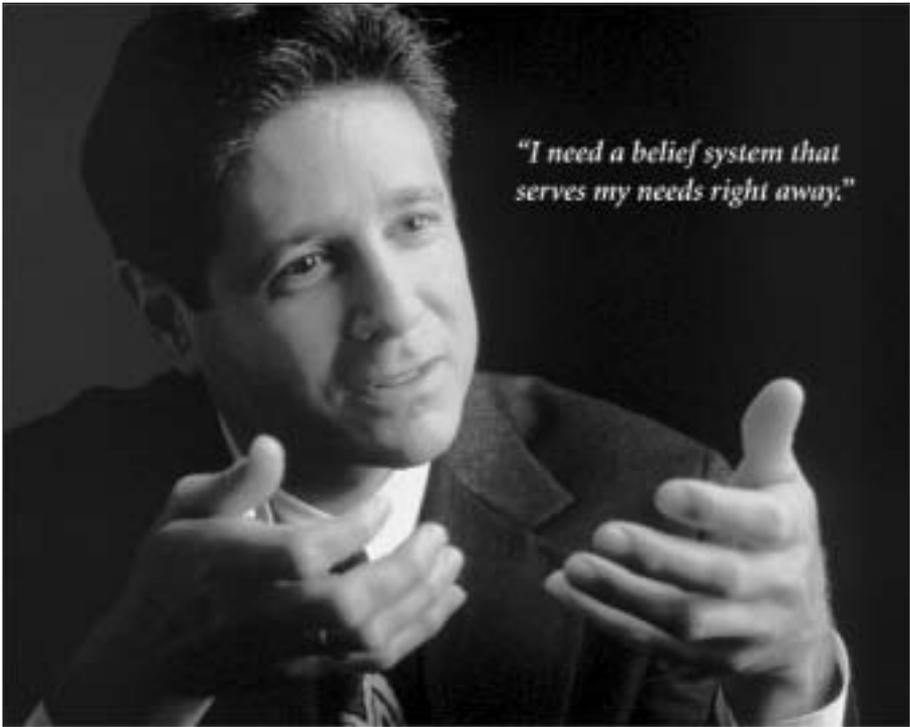
There are two things at which Americans have always excelled: One is generating almost unimaginable material wealth, and the other is feeling bad about it. If guilt and materialism are two sides of a single very American coin, it's a coin that has achieved new currency in recent years, as hand-wringing and McMansions vie for our souls like the angels and devils who perch on the shoulders of cartoon characters, urging them to be good or bad.

When Princeton University researchers asked working Americans about these matters a decade ago, 89 percent of those surveyed agreed that “our society is much too materialistic,” and 74 percent said that materialism is a serious social problem. Since then, a good deal has been written about materialism, and magazines such as *Real Simple* (filled with advertising) have sprung up to combat it. But few of us would argue that we've become any less consumed with consuming; the latest magazine sensation, after all, is *Lucky*, which dispenses with all the editorial folderol and devotes itself entirely to offering readers things they can buy.

The real question is, *Why* should we worry? Why be of two minds about what we buy and how well we live? Most of us have earned what we possess; we're not members of some hereditary landed gentry. Our material success isn't to blame for anyone else's poverty—and, on the contrary, might even ameliorate it (even Third World sweatshops have this effect, much as we might lament them). So how come we're so sheepish about possessions? Why do we need a class of professional worrywarts—a.k.a. the intelligentsia—to warn us, from the stern pulpits of Cambridge, Berkeley, and other bastions of higher education (and even higher real estate prices) about the perils of consumerism run amok?

There are good reasons, to be sure. If we saved more, we could probably achieve faster economic growth. If we taxed ourselves more, we might reduce income inequality. If we consumed less, our restraint might help the environment (although the environment mostly has grown cleaner as spending has increased). Then, too, there's a personal price to be paid for affluence: Because we're so busy pursuing our individual fortunes, we endure a dizzying rate of change and weakened community and family ties.

There is merit in all these arguments, but while I know lots of people who are ambivalent about their own consumerism, hardly any seem to worry that their getting and spending is undermining the economy or



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Americans seem to embrace withering critiques of the consumerist ethos such as this barb in Adbusters magazine, but they're not deterred by them from heading out to the mall.

pulling people off family farms. No, the real reason for our unease about possessions is that many of us, just like the makers of Hebrew National franks, still seem to answer to a higher power. We may not articulate it, but what really has us worried is how we think God wants us to behave.

And on that score, materialism was making people nervous long before there was an America. In the Bible, the love of money is said to be the root of all evil, and the rich man has as much of a shot at heaven as a camel has of passing through the eye of a needle. On the other hand, biblical characters who enjoy God's blessings have an awful lot of livestock, and other neat stuff as well. Though Job loses everything while God is testing him, he gets it all back when he passes the test. Perhaps even God is of two minds about materialism. Here on earth, however, tra-

ditional authorities have always insisted that materialism is a challenge not just to the social order but to the perfection of God's world. James B. Twitchell, a student of advertising and a cheerful iconoclast on materialism, has observed that sumptuary laws were once enforced by ecclesiastical courts "because luxury was defined as living above one's station, a form of insubordination against the concept of *copia*—the idea that God's world is already full and complete."

America represents the antithesis of that idea. Many of the earliest European settlers were motivated by religion, yet by their efforts they transformed the new land—God's country?—into a nation of insubordinates, determined not so much to live above their station as to refuse to acknowledge they even had one. Surely this is the place Joseph Schumpeter had in mind when he wrote of "creative destruction." America was soon enough a nation where money could buy social status, and American financial institutions pioneered such weapons of mass consumption as the credit card. Today, no other nation produces material wealth on quite the scale we do—and citizens of few other affluent countries are allowed to keep as much of their earnings. In America, I daresay, individuals have direct control of more spending per capita than in just about any other nation.

If affluence is a sign of grace, is it any wonder that Americans are more religious than most other modern peoples? Twitchell is right in observing

that the roots of our ambivalence about materialism are essentially religious in nature. They can be traced all the way back to Yahweh's injunction against graven images, which might distract us from God or suggest by their insignificant dimensions some limits to his grandeur. Over the centuries

the holiest among us, at least putatively, have been those who shunned material possessions and kept their eyes on some higher prize. From that elevated perspective, material goods, which are essentially transient, seem emblems of human vanity and gaudy memento mori. Unless you happen to be a pharaoh, you can't take it with you; there's a much better chance that your kids will have to get rid of it at a garage sale. Ultimately, our love-hate relationship with materialism reflects the tension between our age-old concern with the afterlife and our inevitable desire for pleasure and comfort in this one.

The Puritans wrestled this contradiction with characteristic intelligence and verve, but our guilt about materialism is probably their legacy. They understood that there was nothing inherently evil in financial success, and much

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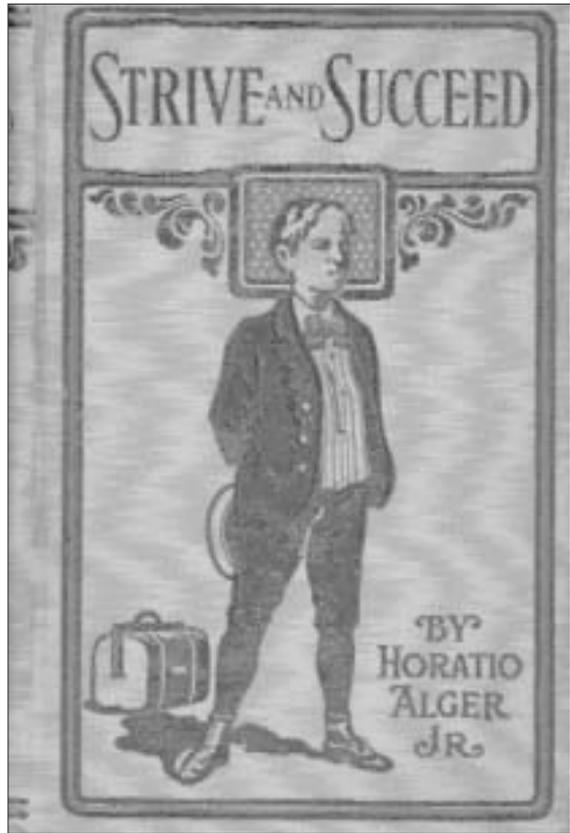
potential good, given how the money might be used. The same work ethic, Protestant or otherwise, powers the economy today. Americans take less time off than Europeans, for instance, and there is no tradition here of the idle rich. But the Puritans also believed that poverty made it easier to get close to God. Worldly goods “are veils set betwixt God and us,” wrote the English Puritan Thomas Watson, who added: “How ready is [man] to terminate his happiness in externals.”

Leland Ryken, a biblical scholar and professor of English at Wheaton College who has written extensively about Christian attitudes toward work and leisure, shrewdly

observes that the Puritans regarded money as a social good rather than a mere private possession: “The Puritan outlook stemmed from a firm belief that people are stewards of what God has entrusted to them. Money is ultimately God’s, not ours. In the words of the influential Puritan book *A Godly Form of Household Government*, money is ‘that which God hath lent thee.’” So who are you to go buying a Jaguar with that bonus check?

As if to dramatize Puritan ambivalence about wealth, New England later produced a pair of influential nonconformists, Horatio Alger, Jr. (1832–99) and Henry David Thoreau (1817–62), whose work embodies sharply contrasting visions of material wealth; for better or worse, we’ve learned from both of them. Alger’s many novels and stories offered an ethical template for upward mobility, even as they gave him a sanitized outlet for his dangerous fantasies about young boys. Thoreau, meanwhile, came to personify the strong disdain for materialism—what might be called the sexual plumage of capitalism—that would later be expressed by commentators such as Thorstein Veblen and Juliet Schor.

Alger and Thoreau had much in common. Both were from Massachusetts, went to Harvard, and lived, in various ways, as outsiders. Their lives overlapped for 30 years. Both struggled at times financially, and both apparently were homosexual.



In a series of books that sold more than 100 million copies, Horatio Alger, Jr., popularized the ideal of the self-made man.

The popular image of Thoreau is of the lone eccentric contemplating nature at Walden Pond. In fact, he spent only two years and two months there, and while he always preferred to be thinking and writing, he spent much of his life improving his father's pencil business, surveying land, and otherwise earning money. Of course, Thoreau scorned business as anything more than a means to an end. His literary output, mostly ignored in his lifetime, won a wide audience over the years, in part, perhaps, because of the triumph of the materialism he so reviled. Thoreau's instinctive disdain for money-making, his natural asceticism and implicit environmentalism, his embrace of civil disobedience, and his opposition to slavery all fit him well for the role of patron saint of American intellectuals.

Alger's work, by contrast, is read by hardly anyone these days, and his life was not as saintly as Thoreau's. When accusations of "unnatural" acts with teenage boys—acts he did not deny—forced him from his pulpit in Brewster, Massachusetts, the erstwhile Unitarian minister decamped for New York City,

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where he became a professional writer. It was in venal New York that he made his name with the kind of stories we associate with him to this day: tales of unschooled but goodhearted lads whose spunk, industry, and yes, good looks, win them material success, with the help of a little luck and their older male mentors. Alger's hackneyed parables are tales of the American dream, itself an accumulation of

hopes that has always had a strongly materialistic component. The books themselves are now ignored, but their central fable has become part of our heritage. "Alger is to America," wrote the novelist Nathanael West, "what Homer was to the Greeks."

If Thoreau won the lofty battle of ideology, Alger won the war on the ground. This tension is most clearly visible among our "opinion leaders," who identify far more easily with Thoreau than with, say, Ragged Dick. One reason may be that few writers and scholars seem to have Alger stories of their own. I rarely meet journalists or academics from poor or even working-class families, and even the movie business, built by hardscrabble immigrants from icy Eastern Europe, is run today by the children of Southern California sunshine and prosperity.

Hollywood aside, journalists, academics, and intellectuals have already self-selected for anti-materialist bias by choosing a path away from money, which may account for why they're so down on consumerism (unless it involves Volvo station wagons). In this they're true to their ecclesiastical origins; monasteries, after all, were once havens of learning, and intellectuals often operated in a churchly context. Worse yet, some intellectuals, abetted by tenure and textbook sales, are doing very

well indeed, and they in turn can feel guilty about all those itinerant teaching fellows and underpaid junior faculty whose lives suggest a comment by Robert Musil in his novel *The Man without Qualities*: “In every profession that is followed not for the sake of money but for love,” wrote Musil, “there comes a moment when the advancing years seem to be leading into the void.”

There are no such feelings in the self-made man (or woman). Once a staple of American life and literature, the self-made man is now a somewhat discredited figure. Like the Puritans, knowing moderns doubt that anyone really can be self-made (except maybe immigrants), though they’re certainly not willing to assign to God the credit for success. Besides, more of us now are *born* comfortable, even if we work as hard as if we weren’t, and this change may account for the persistence of minimalism as a style of home décor among the fashionable. The perversely Veblenesque costliness of minimalist design—all that glossy concrete, and no cheap clamshell moldings to slap over the ragged seams where the doorways casually meet the drywall—attests to its ascetic snob appeal. So does the general democratization of materialism. Once *everybody* has possessions, fashion can fulfill its role, which is to reinforce the primacy of wealth and give those in the know a way of distinguishing themselves, only by shunning possessions altogether.

“Materialism,” in this context, refers to somebody else’s wanting what you already have. When my teenage nephew, in school, read Leo Tolstoy’s “How Much Land Does a Man Need?”—a parable about greed whose grim answer is: six feet for a burial plot—nobody told the students that Tolstoy himself owned a 4,000-acre estate (inherited, of course). We have plenty of such well-heeled hypocrites closer to home. John Lennon, for example, who lugubriously sang “imagine no possessions,” made a bundle with the Beatles and lived at the Dakota, an unusually prestigious and expensive apartment building even by New York City standards. And before moving into a \$1.7 million house in New York’s northern suburbs, Hillary Rodham Clinton told the World Economic Forum in Davos that without a strong civil society, we risk succumbing to unbridled materialism. “We are creating a consumer-driven culture that promotes values and ethics that undermine both capitalism and democracy,” she warned. But Mrs. Clinton soon suspended her concerns about capitalism and democracy to accept a controversial avalanche of costly china and other furnishings for the new house.

Heck, Thoreau could never have spent all that time at Walden if his friend Ralph Waldo Emerson hadn’t bought the land. It’s fitting that getting and spending—by somebody—gave us our most famous anti-materialist work of literature. Getting and spending by everyone else continues to make the intellectual life possible, which is why universities are named for the likes of Carnegie, Rockefeller, Stanford, and Duke. Every church has a collection plate, after all, even if the priests like to bite the hands that feed them. □