

Superdevelopment: A Serious Threat to Global Development

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Introduction

I would like to take a *somewhat different* perspective on development. I'm going to talk about "*superdevelopment*." Pope John Paul II made a contrast between *underdevelopment*, which he said is unacceptable, and *superdevelopment*—also, in its own way unacceptable. I would like to develop John Paul's idea—the idea that superdevelopment—or consumerism—is a serious *barrier to development*, because it consumes resources that could otherwise be used for development.

Consumerism can be a difficult topic to discuss. I want to illustrate this difficulty with a story from the former Soviet Union. A commissar was inspecting a Soviet plant. He went up to one of the workers and asks him:

"Comrade, if you had two houses, what would you do with them?" The worker replies:

"I would give one to the Party and keep one for myself"

"Very good," the commissar says. If you had two cars, what would you do?"

"I would give one to the Party and keep one for myself."

"Very good. Comrade, if you had two pairs of shoes, what would you do with them?"

Silence. The worker doesn't answer. The party boss asks him again:

“Comrade, *what would you do if you had two pairs of shoes?*”

Finally, the worker replies.

“It’s a difficult question,” he says. “You see, I already *have* two pairs of shoes”

Consumerism is a hard topic to discuss, because it affects all of us, personally. Because we already have: more than two pairs of shoes (not to mention at least two cars, two houses or more, and so on). I have been studying consumerism for some years now, and I always find that it makes me examine my own life. Even while working on this paper, just a couple of weeks ago: my daughter left my Apple iPhone out in the rain. One of my first reactions was: Oh good, I’ve been looking for an excuse to get a new one, because mine is the older version, and I want to upgrade to the one with GPS. (Unfortunately—I *should* say *fortunately*—the rain did not damage it, so I still have my old one).

Consumerism is a temptation for all of us, and I think that it is more *serious* than we realize.

HARMS OF SUPER-DEVELOPMENT

The Pope defined superdevelopment or consumerism as the condition of “an excessive availability of every kind of material goods,” which makes us “slaves of ‘possession’ and of immediate gratification...”¹

Barrier to development

I want to develop this idea of consumerism as a barrier to development, and talk about we might be able to do about it. This idea is at least implicit in the quote from *Centesimus annus* that is the topic for this panel, that the special effort to mobilize resources for development will require “redefining the priorities and hierarchies of values on the basis of which economic and political choices are made.”²

Our current priorities and hierarchies of values are largely consumerist; we need to change these to free up more resources for development. The Pope makes this claim more explicit later in the encyclical, where he calls again for a “... concerted worldwide effort to promote development” and says that:

“This may mean making *important changes* in established life-styles, in order to limit the waste of environmental and human resources, thus enabling every individual and all the peoples of the earth to have a sufficient share of those resources.”³

So if we had less consumerist lifestyles, we would have more room for *generosity* and be more able to share resources with those in need, instead of consuming so much of them ourselves.

Also harmful within developing countries

Consumerism is also harmful *within* developing countries, because there it provides a *false* sense of what development looks like, and ends up misguiding development efforts and wasting resources. This is a point that has been made by the Pontifical Council for Social Communications at least a couple of times.⁴

I remember this kind of thing from my own childhood. I was born and raised on the island of Malta. In the 1970's, when I was growing up, we had a GDP/capita somewhere between Mexico and Algeria—so we were not a particularly wealthy country. Yet one of the biggest goals for all my friends and I was to have expensive clothing with the Lacoste crocodile on it. We see this phenomenon even among poor people in developed nations. Recent research has shown that poorer people in richer countries tend to spend *significantly more* of their income, proportionately, on luxury goods—cars, jewelry—than richer people do, because that is the image of success that they have come to embrace.⁵

Also harmful in itself

In addition to being a barrier to development, consumerism is also harmful in itself—to those who experience it. There is extensive psychological research that shows that people who suffer from consumerism have: *lower satisfaction* with their lives; a greater tendency to compulsive spending; higher incidences of depression; and lower ethical standards.⁶

Even more serious than this, though, as John Paul II pointed out, are the *spiritual harms* of consumerism, where people are led to consider themselves and their lives “as a series of sensations to be experienced rather than as a work to be accomplished.”⁷ This is particularly concerning in terms of the harm it causes to the family. The health of the family, as we know, is essential to the health of society, because it is here “in which man receives his first formative ideas about truth and goodness.”⁸ Consumerism “causes a person to reject a commitment to enter into a stable relationship with another person and to bring children into the world,” or to “consider children as one of the many ‘things’ which an individual can have or not have, according to taste, and which compete with other possibilities.”⁹ There is no need to review the statistics of declining birthrates throughout the Western world here—they are all too familiar; I think it is fair to say that this decline is at least in part a result of consumerism.

CAUSES OF CONSUMERISM

If we want to fight consumerism, it is important to know what causes it. In the secular literature, there are a number of rival theories about what causes consumerism.

Three competing theories

The first one I will call the Marketing view. This is the view of my colleagues in the academic field of marketing, and also of many of the supporters of the free market. The view is that consumerism is part of human nature, and so whenever human beings achieve prosperity, we get consumerism—so there is really nothing you can do about it.¹⁰

The historical evidence does seem to provide some support for this view. Historian Peter Stearns has documented how, throughout history, prosperity has always been accompanied by consumerism arose; some examples he gives are the later Roman Republic and the Arab Warriors of the 10th century.¹¹ More recently, with the growth of the free market, and the prosperity it has brought, it appears that the extent of consumerism has also grown, providing further evidence that consumerism is an unpleasant but unavoidable consequence of prosperity.

The second view contradicts the first, and I'll call this the Anti-capitalist view. This is the view that consumerism is part of the alienation caused by the structures of capitalism. It's the view held by many contemporary critics of the free market.¹²

The third view is the evolutionary biology view. According to this view, consumerism is the result of our attempts to prove how fit we are for the evolutionary fight for survival—to prove our health, or strength, or popularity. We do this, apparently, in order to attract mates to reproduce with and friends to support us.¹³ This view claims that many of the products we buy—particularly luxury products—are really just attempts to signal our evolutionary fitness. One buys a Botox cosmetic injection treatment to signal youth or a Hummer, to signal strength, for example.¹⁴

Flaws in the theories, and an alternative

Like most popular ideas, each of these three theories has a grain of truth in it, but each also appears to be quite flawed. Consider the marketing view first. What is true about this view, is that some level of prosperity is a necessary requirement for consumerism—you do, after all, need *something* to consume to be consumerist. However, it is a consequence of *fallen* human nature, and therefore it *can* be overcome by grace and virtue—particularly the virtue of generosity. So to claim that there is nothing we can do about consumerism in a prosperous society is to argue that we have no free will—that we are permanently slaves to our desires.

For the Anti-capitalist view, the kernel of truth is that it *is* likely that capitalism, and particularly the practice of marketing, can and does encourage consumerism. But it does seem rather extreme to say that therefore the only way to get rid of consumerism is to eliminate the free market economy entirely.

And finally the evolutionary biology perspective is correct, it seems to me, when it claims that many consumer purchases are made in an attempt to impress people. However this is probably for the purposes of more immediate gratification, not because one cares so much about how one's descendants are going to evolve.

By contrast, I would like to present what seems to me to be a more convincing explanation of how consumerism arises, from *Centesimus annus*. While discussing the specific problems with the more advanced economies, the John Paul wrote that if

... a direct appeal is made to [man's] instincts—while ignoring in various ways the reality of the person as intelligent and free—then consumer attitudes and life-styles can be created which are objectively improper and often damaging to his physical and spiritual health.¹⁵

So, in other words, if *in the way we promote products*, we appeal to people's instincts without respecting their reason and free will, we encourage consumerism. This view builds on the traditional Christian understanding that we are inherently susceptible to greed, because of original sin, but unlike the physical temptations of lust or gluttony, which come from the body, greed comes from the mind. Abbot Jamison, of the monastery of Worth, in England, has applied the wisdom of the desert fathers, and particularly Joannes Cassianus, to contemporary psychological and spiritual problems. With regard to greed, he notes that Cassianus taught that "greed begins with apparently harmless thoughts," thoughts about being dissatisfied with what we have—and then it grows from there. Greed is the result of the thoughts we have—the stories we tell ourselves—of what success in life looks like, and what it will take for us to be satisfied.¹⁶

In our society, the stories we tell ourselves about the meaning of our lives are heavily influenced by the media. So you would expect media to affect levels of consumerism, and in fact that appears to be the case, as we know from several research studies: the more television you watch, for example, the more consumerist you are.¹⁷

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

So if consumerism is a problem of the mind, one that is affected by the stories we tell ourselves about the meaning of life, what can we do about it? John Paul II says that "a great deal of educational and cultural work is urgently needed,

... including the education of consumers in the responsible use of their power of choice, the formation of a strong sense of responsibility among producers and among people in the mass media in particular, as well as the necessary intervention by public authorities.¹⁸

But what should be the *content* of this education? The Holy Father does not provide specifics, and therefore I would like to propose three ideas that I think can help fight consumerism and, hopefully, free up more resources for development.

Three ideas

The three ideas are that: consumerism does not satisfy; we should avoid promoting consumerism; and the pursuit of productive private property is a useful substitute for consumerism.

Consumerism does not satisfy

The first idea that we should be promoting is that consumerism offers a false promise. It is a disappointing waste of money, because it promises satisfaction but does not deliver. We buy certain products because we think they will make us happier, but then they don't—or if they do, it's just for a very short time, and then we have to go shopping again.

Why do we keep falling for this trick—this idea that consumerism will make us happy? There is quite a bit of evidence from an area of media research called “cultivation theory,” that media is actually very successful in getting us to believe things that are absolutely not the case. A couple of examples: if you survey people about the amount of *crime* in their community—they will tend *overestimate* it significantly. People think their society is much more dangerous than it actually is—because there are so many crime programs on television. More mundane—people tend to wildly overestimate the proportion of *young people* relative to older people in Western society, because on television you tend to see so many more young people.¹⁹ So it would not be unreasonable to think that media also gets us to believe that buying things will make us happy—because that's what it looks like on TV.

So if consumerism offers a false promise and does not make us happy, what should we replace it with? What *will* make us happy? John Paul II talks about the kinds of lifestyles we should be creating. He wrote that “consumer choices, savings and investments” should be determined by life-styles focused on the quest for “truth, beauty, goodness and communion with others for the sake of common growth.”²⁰ So what *does* lead to happiness is the pursuit of truth, beauty, goodness, and communion with others, and so that is where we should be spending our time and money. So instead of watching television or going shopping, we should spend more time reading, walking, and making music. Just a simple example: for our parish community, my wife has been organizing traditional folk dancing events—and these have been very well received.

Avoid promoting consumerism

The second idea follows logically from the first: the promotion of consumerism should be avoided. This might seem obvious, except that it is not unusual for people to *celebrate* consumerism, as a source of economic growth. If you think of it from the perspective of the producer, it's not unreasonable to ask, Doesn't consumerism increase sales—isn't it good for my business if there are lots of consumerist people out there, addicting to buying my products? There are two ways to answer this. The first is to say, well, *even if* consumerism did grow my business, and make more profits for me, that does not justify it morally. Pornography is apparently a very profitable business, but does not mean that we should be investing in it.

But there is also a more pragmatic response: the idea that promoting consumerism may *not* in fact necessarily be good for business. John Paul has noted that serving authentic needs makes us more productive. He wrote that “Work becomes ever more fruitful and productive to the extent that we have a better understanding of the needs of those for whom we work.”²¹ And these needs should be based on an “appropriate concept of man and of his true good.”²² So having a better understanding of the true needs and serving the true good of my customers should ultimately make my business more productive.

The implication of this is that encouraging consumerism among my customers is not necessarily going to be *good* for my business. The research cited above suggests, for example, that consumerist customers are less reliable, because they tend to go “binge shopping”—a lot of shopping in a short time, and then a period of withdrawal; that consumerist customers are more likely to go bankrupt; and that they are also less ethical, so they are more likely to try to steal from me. These don't sound like ideal customers.

In general—and contrary to common perceptions—appealing to consumers' baser instincts is *not necessarily* more profitable than providing more wholesome products. The Dove Foundation study of the US film industry found that the average profit per adult (R-rated) film was \$ 18 million, compared to \$ 92 million per family-oriented (G-rated) film. So doing the right thing, serving the true good of your customers, is not necessarily less profitable; in this case, it's quite the opposite.

It can also be more profitable to promote *non-consumerist* practices among your customers—it can help differentiate your company, and make customers more loyal. Kimberly-Clark Corporation, manufacturers of Scott tissues and Huggies diapers, have created a website they call the “Common Sense Community,” where they post articles and advice on how to save money and avoid waste. One would think that a consumer company teaching their customers how to avoid waste would be harmful to their business, but they have found—on the contrary—that it is good for their business.²³

The question of whether consumerism is good for growth can also be raised at the macro-economic level. A thorough investigation of this question would require significantly more than the length restrictions of this paper. For our purposes here, though, it should be sufficient to note that the alternative to spending is saving; more saving means more investment, which is as good—if not better—for overall economic growth than more spending would be. And therefore there does not appear to be any basis for justifying consumerism by saying that it is good for the economy.

Productive property is a useful alternative

The third idea takes a more positive angle; it focuses on *productive* private property. This idea is that, just because consumerism is harmful, it doesn't mean that the *desire to own property* is itself a bad thing. The desire to own property is a natural and a useful thing; John Paul wrote that ownership of private property is “fundamental for the autonomy and development of the person.”²⁴ Following this, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says that the role of private property is for “guaranteeing the freedom and dignity of persons and for helping each of them to meet his basic needs and the needs of those in his charge.”²⁵

The difficulty with this, in contemporary society, is that we have come to look to the State as the guarantor of freedom and dignity, and not to individual private property. Government assistance clearly has an important role to play. Yet, while there was a time when people looked to their own property for their security and independence in life, today, because the majority of people have come to depend on their government for their security, they no longer see private property as security, and instead think of it as a source of *pleasure*. When we discuss private property today, the images that come to mind are vacation homes and yachts.

This is why the institution of private property becomes so difficult to defend, politically. If private property is seen as just a luxury of the rich—rather than as security for the many—then we should not be surprised when we see more and more attacks on property rights. We need to *recover* this original purpose of private property. And the way to do this, I would like to suggest, is to promote the idea of *productive* property, to convince people that there is nothing wrong with working hard to acquire property, but they should be focusing primarily on acquiring *productive* property.

When the average person thinks of acquiring property, he thinks of a larger home, or a vacation home, or a more luxurious car. These things in themselves are not *bad*. What is not right, though, is to make them the priority. The priority instead should be given to *productive property*—to investment. So while it is a fallacy to look to possessions for your happiness, there is nothing wrong with acquiring possessions if they are productive.

Productive property provides security and independence for families. So instead of just thinking of a larger house and a better car, we should encourage people to think in terms of

buying properties to rent out, for example, or buying a share in a business, or some other investment. The same applies to consumer debt. We should be hammering home the idea that borrowing money for anything other than a productive use is a terrible idea. Borrowing money to take your family away on a holiday is the worst kind of consumerism—because you’re consuming resources you don’t even have yet.

I don’t suggest that we should be making specific rules here. These decisions have to be made by each family, and not imposed on them. That’s why I believe—incidentally—that trying to address consumerism through tax policy, as some have suggested, is not a good idea, because it would be a violation of subsidiarity.²⁶ However, I do think we should promote this idea of a greater focus on *productive* property as a source of security and independence for families, in contrast with the idea of property as just another aspect of consumerism.

The other benefit of focusing on *productive* property is that it helps us advance the “universal destination of the earth’s goods.”²⁷ The idea of the universal destination—in the words of John Paul, is that “God gave the earth to the whole human race for the sustenance of all its members, without excluding or favoring anyone.”²⁸ Universal Destination of Goods does not *contradict* the idea of private property—it just tells us what we are supposed to *do* with our property. Instead of using my property for my exclusive enjoyment, I should use it to support my family and to serve others, to provide employment, give to charity, and so on. And productive property does exactly that. Productive property produces more property—more wealth—and also provides opportunities for employment, while property that is consumed does none of these things.

Conclusion

Consumerism is physically, psychologically, and spiritually harmful, and it consumes resources that could be dedicated to development. I have suggested that we try to promote three ideas that could help counter it: first, that consumerism does not satisfy; second, that we should not promote consumerism; and, third, that the pursuit of *productive* property is a healthy and useful alternative to consumerism.

¹ Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, 28.

² Ibid.

³ *Centesimus annus*, 52.

⁴ *Communio et Progressio*, in 1971, and *Ethics in Advertising*, 1997.

⁵ Charles, K. K., E. Hurst, and N. L. Roussanov (2007), "Conspicuous consumption and race," NBER Working Paper (No. W13392).

⁶ Russell W. Belk, "Materialism: Trait Aspects of Living in the Material World," *Journal of Consumer Research* 12 (1985), Russell W. Belk, "Three Scales to Measure Constructs Related to Materialism: Reliability, Validity and Relationship to Measures of Happiness," *Advances in Consumer Research* 11 (1983) ; Scott Dawson and G. Bamossy, "If We Are What We Have, What Are We When We Don't Have?," *Journal of Social Behavior and Personality* 6 (1991).; Aaron C. Ahuvia and Nancy Y. Wong, "Materialism: Origins and Implications for Personal Well-Being," in *European Advances in Consumer Research*, ed. F. Hansen (Copenhagen, Denmark: Association for Consumer Research, 1995).; Tim Kasser and R. M. Ryan, "A Dark Side of the American Dream: Correlates of Financial Success as a Central Life Aspiration," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 65 (1993).; James A Muncy and Jacqueline K. Eastman, "Materialism and Consumer Ethics: An Exploratory Study," *Journal of Business Ethics* 17, no. 2 (1998).; Marsha L. Richins and Scott Dawson, "A Consumer Values Orientation for Materialism and Its Measurement: Scale Development and Validation," *Journal of Consumer Research* 19 (1992).; Aric Rindfleisch, James E. Burroughs, and Frank Denton, "Family Structure, Materialism and Compulsive Consumption," *Journal of Consumer Research* 23, no. 4 (1997).; James A. Roberts, Chris Manolis, and John F. Tanner, "Family Structure, Materialism, and Compulsive Buying: A Re inquiry and Extension," *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* 31, no. 3 (2003).; Newell D. Wright and Val Larsen, "Materialism and Life Satisfaction: A Meta-Analysis," *Journal of Consumer Satisfaction, Dissatisfaction, and Complaining Behavior* 6 (1993). The findings from these US studies are replicated in Europe (Western and Eastern), Asia, and Australia: R. Chan and C. Joseph, "Dimensions of Personality, Domains of Aspiration, and Subjective Well-Being," *Personality and Individual Differences* 28 (2000), Edward Diener and S. Oishi, "Money and Happiness: Income and Subjective Well-Being across Nations," in *Subjective Well-Being across Cultures*, ed. Edward Diener and E.M. Suh (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000), Tim Kasser and Aaron C. Ahuvia, "Materialistic Values and Well-Being in Business Students," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 32 (2002), K.A. Keng et al., "The Influence of Materialistic Inclination on Values, Life Satisfaction and Aspirations: An Empirical Analysis," *Social Indicators Research* 49 (2000), Lisa Ryan and Suzanne Dziurawiec, "Materialism and Its Relationship to Life Satisfaction," *Social Indicators Research* 55, no. 2 (2001), R. M. Ryan et al., "The American Dream in Russia: Extrinsic Aspirations and Well-Being in Two Cultures," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 25 (1999), S. Saunders and D. Munro, "The Construction and Validation of a Consumer Orientation Questionnaire (Soci) Designed to Measure Fromm's (1955) "Marketing Character" In Australia," *Social Behavior and Personality* 28 (2000), P. Schmuck, "Intrinsic and Extrinsic Life Goals Preferences as Measured Via Inventories and Via Priming Methodologies: Mean Differences and Relations with Well-Being," in *Life Goals and Well-Being: Towards a Positive Psychology of Human Striving*, ed. P. Schmuck and K.M. Sheldon (Goettingen, Germany: Hogrefe and Huber, 2001), Joseph M. Sirgy et al., "A Life Satisfaction Measure: Additional Validation Data for the Congruity Life Satisfaction Measure," *Social Indicators Research* 34 (1995), W.R. Swinyard, A. Kau, and H. Phua, "Happiness, Materialism, and Religious Experience in the U.S. And Singapore," *Journal of Happiness Studies* 2 (2001). These studies tend to use the word "materialism" instead of "consumerism," but they define materialism to mean the same thing as what we here referring to as consumerism, namely excessive focus on material consumption

⁷ *Centesimus annus*, 39.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Cf. for example Abela, Andrew V. (2006), "Marketing and Consumerism: A Response to O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy," *European Journal of Marketing*, 40 (1/2), 5-16, and O'Shaughnessy, John and Nicholas

Jackson O'Shaughnessy (2007), "Reply to criticisms of marketing, the consumer society and hedonism," *European Journal of Marketing*, 41 (1/2), 7-16.

¹¹ Stearns, Peter N. (2001), *Consumerism in World History: The global transformation of desire*. New York: Routledge.

¹² Cf. for example Klein, Naomi (1999), *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies*. New York: Picador.

¹³ Miller, Geoffrey (2009), *Spent: Sex, Evolution, and Consumer Behavior*. New York: Viking; the three theories presented in this paper are adapted from *Spent*.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ *Centesimus annus*, 36.

¹⁶ Jamison, Christopher (2008), *Finding Happiness: Monastic Steps for a Fulfilling Life*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 97.

¹⁷ Cf. e.g. Good, Jennifer (2007), "Shop 'til We Drop? Television, Materialism and Attitudes About the Natural Environment," *Mass Communication and Society*, 10 (3), 365 - 83. The causal direction is still debatable, although most likely it flows both ways.

¹⁸ *Centesimus annus*, 36.

¹⁹ Gerbner, George, Larry Gross, Michael Morgan, Nancy Signorelli, and James Shanahan (2002), "Growing Up with Television: Cultivation Processes," in *Media Effects: Advances in theory and research*, Jennings Bryant and Dolf Zillman, Eds. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

²⁰ *Centesimus annus*, 36.

²¹ Ibid., 31.

²² Ibid., 36.

²³ www.scottcommonsense.com.

²⁴ *Centesimus annus*, 30.

²⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2402.

²⁶ E.g. Frank, Robert H. (1999), *Luxury Fever: Why Money Fails to Satisfy In An Era of Excess*. New York: Free Press.

²⁷ *Centesimus annus*, 31.

²⁸ Ibid.