

Stuffocation: Living More With Less

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Extract

Snakes and Ladders, and the depressing problem with materialism

There is another side of materialism that is just as dark as the many blots on the environment: its effect on our happiness. Now that it has provided so many millions of us with the basics of material wellbeing, materialism seems unable to also improve our overall wellbeing. Instead, it increasingly looks like it is doing the opposite. Rather than making us feel good, materialism is making millions of us feel joyless, anxious and, even worse, depressed.

The first person to offer scientific proof of this was a researcher named Richard Easterlin. Easterlin wanted to find out whether having more makes people any happier. To find out, he compared data on economic growth and happiness since the end of the Second World War, from nineteen countries, both developed ones like the US and the UK and less developed countries like India and Brazil. The results were startling: once people had enough to meet their basic needs, happiness did not vary much with national income. He also found that although people were earning ever more in the US after the war, they were not becoming happier. In fact, they had become less happy since 1960.

Why? Perhaps the best way to answer that is over a hot drink and a biscuit with a friendly philosopher. Each morning, the British philosopher Jeremy Bentham liked nothing more than munching some hot, spiced ginger nut biscuits, and sipping a cup of strong coffee. But, as Bentham once observed, while he liked the first cup of coffee very much, the second was far less enjoyable. Economists and sociologists have a name for this: the law of diminishing marginal utility. But we do not need a technical name to understand Bentham's point. In that simple observation I think he has summed up the problem of *Stuffocation* and the paradox of materialism: a little is good, but you can have too much of a good thing.

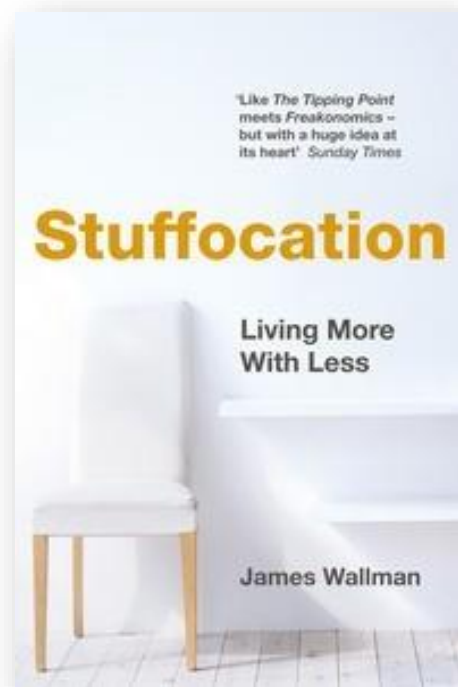
A Hungarian-American economist called Tibor Scitovsky had another suggestion to explain why increasing prosperity was not leading to more happiness. In his 1976 book *The Joyless Economy*, he wrote that it could be because of materialism's 'dark side': all the unintended consequences of material progress such as the harm it does to our health, the environment, and future generations because of 'our reckless brandishing of weapons, extermination of pests, squandering of resources, popping of pills, ingesting of food additives, and use or overuse of every mechanical aid to our comfort and safety'.

'Could it not be,' Scitovsky asked, 'that we seek our satisfaction in the wrong things, or in the wrong way, and are then dissatisfied with the outcome?' The answer is 'yes' – if those things are material goods.

Material goods, it must be said, can be useful for self-expression and signifying status – the type of shoes or shirt you wear says a lot about you, for instance. But in our materialistic consumer culture, we have come to rely on material goods too much, and they are letting us down.

In today's materialistic culture, many people believe material things can solve emotional problems. But this, as the psychologist Oliver James wrote, is a 'false promise'. Retail therapy does not work. Instead, it is more likely to make your problems worse – by putting you in debt, for instance.

In today's culture, material goods have become substitutes for deep and genuinely meaningful human desires and questions. Consumer culture has become a sort of pseudo-religion. Instead of pondering meaningful questions, like 'Why



am I here?', 'What happens after death?', 'How should I live?', it's easier to focus on questions like 'The blue one or the red one?', 'Will that go with the top I bought last week?', 'What will she think if I buy that?' Instead of trying to understand who we really are, we reach for the 'Real Thing'. And, brainwashed by the system, when the goods we buy fail to match up to those deep desires, instead of giving up on material goods, we just keep banging our heads against the wall and buying more.

Mass-produced goods, which are the natural product of the system, are the worst of all. They are so stripped of meaning and novelty that they have little chance of genuinely exciting or inspiring us. 'The monotony of mass production is fully matched,' Scitovsky wrote, 'by the monotony of its product.' So we become quickly bored with the goods we have and, in the search for novelty, move on to the next thing, and begin the process again.

Even where material goods are helpful, by signifying status, they create more problems than they solve. Because in today's meritocratic society having goods signifies success and, equally, not having goods says failure. As a result, we are not only smugly or painfully aware of who is above or below us in the pecking order. We also know we can clamber up or slip down the rankings at any moment. It is like living in an immense, stomach-churning session of Snakes and Ladders, where the game never stops and where everybody is a competitor. To play this paranoia-inducing game – and it is a game we all play – millions of us spend our days and nights worrying about our place in the pecking order, and scheming to get up the ladders and avoid the snakes. The end result is millions suffering from material-focused status anxiety.

Even worse than giving us status anxiety, materialism is making people depressed, in record numbers and to a record extent. From the 1970s to the turn of the century, mental illness in children and adults in developed countries doubled. A quarter of Britons now suffer emotional distress. Americans are three times more likely to be depressed today than in the 1950s. Those statistics are so shocking that many try to explain them away by pointing out that people tended to suffer silently in the past, and that doctors are quicker to diagnose and prescribe antidepressants today. But those numbers are based on extensive and robust research, on anonymous survey reports from individuals and not from doctor diagnoses. So there is no doubt that depression is increasing, and at an alarming rate.

This becomes even more illuminating, and concerning, when you make comparisons between countries. Because, it turns out, emotional illness increases with income inequality, which also tends to be higher in English-speaking nations. In other words, as the psychologist Oliver James observed in *Affluenza*, the more a society resembles the US, in that it becomes materialistic, the higher the rate of emotional distress. The logical conclusion is one of the darkest sides of materialism: mass production and mass consumption, ultimately, cause mass depression. That, surely, is not what anyone would call progress.