LET THEM EAT CAKE
by James Twitchell

LUXE 'R' US

Who but fools, toadies and hacks have ever come to the defense of modern American luxury? No one, not even bulk consumers of the stuff, will ever really defend it. And why should they?

The very idea that what we have defines who we are is repulsive to many of us. The irrationality of overvaluing certain rocks, fabrics, logos, textures, wines, bottles, appliances, nameplates, tassels, zip codes, T-shirts, monograms, hotel rooms, purses and the like is insulting to our intellect. At one level this kind of luxury is indefensible. The "good life" seems so blatantly unnecessary, even evil, especially when millions of people around the globe are living without the bare necessities. Plus, after all, it's just cake, a sugar high. Empty calories.

And few of us truly admire those who have amassed vast quantities of this stuff. If Donald Trump has his defenders, it is primarily those who are entertained, not edified, by his obstreperousness. Imelda Marcos is a pathetic character. Ditto Leona Helmsley. It's hard to be on Rodeo Drive and see a man wearing a pinkie ring, a flashy Rolex, decked out like Regis Philbin, getting into a Lincoln Navigator, and not feel a kind of smug self-satisfaction with one's own life. And let's face it, the Vegas Strip is an exciting place to visit, but most of us wouldn't want to live there.

Generations ago, the market for luxury goods consisted of a few people who lived in majestic houses with a full complement of servants, in some time-honored enclave of the privileged. As Holly Brubach has wittily observed, they ordered their trunks from Louis Vuitton, their trousseaus from Christian Dior, their Dom Perignon by the case, and spent lots of time looking out over water. Their taste, like their politics, was determined largely by considerations of safeguarding wealth and perpetuating the social conventions that affirmed their sense of superiority. They stayed put. We watched them from afar. We stayed put. Maybe they had money to burn. We had to buy coal.

The very unassailability of old luxe made it safe, like old name, old blood, old land, old pew, old coat of arms. Primogeniture, the cautious passage and consolidation of wealth to the first-born male, made the anxiety of exclusion somehow bearable. After all, you knew your place from the moment of birth and had plenty of time to make your peace. If you drew a short straw, not to worry. A comfortable life as a vicar would await you. Or the officer corps. For females, marriage became the defining act of social place.

The application of steam and then electricity to the engines of production brought a new market of status, an industrial market, one made up of people who essentially bought their way into having a blood line. These were the people who so disturbed economist Thorstein Veblen, and from them, this new generation of consumer has descended. First, the industrial rich, then the inherited rich and now the incidentally rich, the accidentally rich. Call them yuppies, yippies, bobos--David Brooks' felicitous coinage--nobrows (John Seabrook's) or whatever; although they can't afford a house in Paris' Sixteenth Arrondissement or an apartment on Park Avenue, they have enough disposable income to buy a Vuitton handbag (if not a trunk), a bottle of Dior perfume (if not a flagon), a Bombay martini (if not quite a few) and a timeshare vacation on the water (if not a second home). The consumers of the new luxury have a sense of entitlement that transcends social class, a conviction that the finer things are their birthright--never mind that they were born into a family whose
ancestral home is a tract house in the suburbs, not paid for, and a family crest comes downloaded from the Internet.

These new customers for luxury are younger than clients of the old luxe used to be; they are far more numerous; they make their money far sooner; and they are far more flexible in financing and fickle in choice. They do not stay put. The competition for their attention is intense, and their consumption patterns--if you haven't noticed--are changing life for the rest of us. How concerned should we be? I say, not very. Let them eat cake.

THE ECONOMIC DEFENSE OF OPULUXE

While making status distinctions on the basis of luxury consumption seems silly, even incompatible with common sense, contemporary economists and sociologists are not so sure. Economists like Martin Feldstein at Harvard and Paul David at Stanford have been arguing that certain acts of consumption mimic a kind of equitable savings, a kind of universal investment in a mythic bank of communal value. After all, it may be more efficient--not to mention, more fun--to spend your money buying a badge good like a fancy car or an Armani wardrobe to announce your social place than to do it the old-fashioned way and join the country club. Plus, you don't have to play golf.

Although it is not pictured this way in popular culture, the consumption of high-end goods is rarely impulsive, emotional or extravagant. Instead it may more often be thoughtful, clever and sensible. The film Pretty Woman, with Richard Gere as the bewildered millionaire and Julia Roberts as the insecure hooker, makes a point worth considering. In a sense, modern luxury is insurance against misunderstanding, a momentary stay against panic and confusion. If you can't tell where you are in life by consulting the Social Register, then check your car nameplate, your zip code, the amount of stainless steel wrapped around your barbecue.

That such "peace of mind" can be bought may seem shallow until you realize that the transformation is dependent only on money, and the color of money is always the same. This is a far more equitable currency than the capriciousness of ancestry and the whimsy of gender and birth order. Well into the 19th century, the placement of your family pew was a marker of status. The higher your birth and the larger your bank account, the closer you were to the front--the closer, by implication, to God. Given a choice between a lucky-sperm culture--in which birth decides social place--or a lucky-stock-option culture, I think I prefer the latter.

Now, mind you, this has nothing to do with happiness. As Freud famously said of consuming another product--psychotherapy--high-end consumption will not make you happier, only less anxious. While the poor, loveless, ever-anxious crowd may think that individual satisfaction tracks closely with luxury consumption, such is not the case. Numerous studies show that as society grows richer over time, the average level of happiness--as measured by the percentage of people who rate themselves "happy" or "very happy" in national surveys--doesn't budge. In fact, sometimes it falls.

Does this mean consumption is a treadmill going nowhere? Well-tenured and -tenured economists like Robert Frank and Juliet Schor certainly argue that it does. But at least the treadmills get more comfortable and more people have more access to them. That's got to mean something.

Economists have known about this perplexity for a while. In a famous 1972 essay titled "Is Growth Obsolete?" the Yale University economists William Nordhaus and James Tobin
pointed out that the growing gross domestic product doesn't account for such important factors as leisure, household labor, pollution and unsnarling traffic jams. In fact, in many categories, quality of life may even decline as high-end consumption increases.

On the heels of this study, Richard Easterlin, now an economic historian at the University of Southern California, argued that there was no clear trend in surveys of Americans' reported happiness. Average happiness rose from the 1940s to the late 1950s, then gradually sank again until the early 1970s, even as personal income grew sharply. Returning to the subject a few years ago, Easterlin cited an annual U.S. survey that showed a slight downward trend in the percentage of Americans saying they were "very happy" from 1972 to 1991—even though per capita income, adjusted for inflation and taxes, rose by a third. This perplexity has become so established that it is known as the "Easterlin paradox."

Even when you move away from material consumption as an index, the contradiction remains. William Bennett's leading economic indicators, as well as the environmental indicators from quality-of-life groups like Redefining Progress or from lobbying outfits like Sustainable Seattle or Livable Tucson, show that happiness may be beside the point. Some groups throw into the mix such concerns as legal fees, medical bills, divorce rates, affordable housing and levels of trust. Others push SAT scores, charitable giving, clean-air days or commuting time. No matter how you slice it, chances are if a group makes an index, the one thing it is sure to show is that there is no correlation between affluence and what the group considers happiness. In addition, this disconnect between consumption and happiness seems not to depend on cultural differences. For instance, during the so-called Asian miracle from the late 1950s to the late 1980s, real per capita income in Japan soared nearly fivefold. Average levels of reported satisfaction didn't change an iota.

So let's forget any argument that happiness correlates with buying stuff, let alone luxurious stuff. Lottery winners don't stay happier than other people for long (about two weeks), and accident victims who become paraplegics typically return over time to pre-trauma levels. So if happiness is not related to consumption, why not tamp down luxury consumption--tax or shame it into oblivion?

The answer is not rocket science. While being on the treadmill to the Land of Opuluxe may not provide happiness, not being on the treadmill almost certainly guarantees unhappiness. And discomfort. Instead of asking the have-nots how they are feeling, ask the have-nots. Their answer is existentially simple. Forget where we're going, and since there is nowhere else to go, why not get there in comfort? All aboard. Indeed, the problem is not how to get some people off the treadmill, but how to get other people on. If goods are what carry meaning in this world (and, alas, they do, and have always) then the poor are doubly disenfranchised: They don't have stuff and they don't have the meaning that stuff carries.

ARE WE HAPPY YET? NOT SO FAST

While happiness as the be-all-and-end-all argument has the whiff of a red herring, it is not entirely dismissible. Before you denounce happiness research as leftist propaganda, be aware that it also cuts the other way. For example, if happiness doesn't equate with income, why worry about minimum wages or distributions to the poor? Or to move it up a notch, if you don't want a society in which everyone is desperately trying to get ahead, you might advocate government policies that slow down consumption: high tax rates, generous health and unemployment benefits, long mandatory paid vacations, maybe even a limit on individual working hours. In other words, you might want to turn the United States into France. But are the French happier? Nope. France has an unemployment rate more than twice as high as that of the United States, largely because of those same government
policies. And unemployment makes some people very unhappy.

Professor Stanley Lebergott, an economist at Wesleyan University, has ventured into this moral and economic quicksand. A few years ago he argued in Pursuing Happiness: American Consumers in the Twentieth Century that Americans have "spent their way to happiness." Lest this sound overly Panglossian, what Lebergott means is that while consumption by the rich has remained relatively steady, the rest of us have certainly had a good go of it. If we think that the rich are different from you and me, and that the difference is that the rich have longer shopping lists, then we have, in the last 50 years, substantially caught up.

The most interesting part of Pursuing Happiness is the second half of the book. Here Lebergott unloads reams of government statistics and calculations to chart the path that American consumption has taken through a wide range of products and services—food, tobacco, clothing, fuel, domestic service and medicine, to name only a few. Two themes emerge strongly from this data. The first, not surprisingly, is that Americans were far better off in 1990 than they were in 1900.

For example, real consumer spending rose in 70 of the 84 years between 1900 and 1984. In 1990 an hour's work earned six times as much as in 1900. Most Americans walked to work at the start of the century, but by 1990 essentially none did, in part because nearly 90 percent of families had a car. By 1987 all households had one-time luxuries: a fridge, a radio, nearly all had a TV, and about three-quarters had a washing machine. Per capita spending on food rose by more than 75 percent between 1900 and 1990, with a marked increase in meat consumption. "Wants" became "necessities" because, ironically, the pushing and shoving of other consumers was lowering the price. Your consumption of luxury has made life easier for me.

The second theme emerging from Lebergott's data is that old-line, Left-leaning academic critics such as Robert Heilbroner, Tibor Scitovsky, Robert and Helen Lynd, and Christopher Lasch (plus legions of others now teaching American studies), who have censured the waste and tastelessness of much of American consumerism, may have simply missed the big point. Ditto the Voluntary Simplifiers with all their self-help books, their how-to-buy-less magazines and their cut-excess-consumption videos. OK, OK, money can't buy happiness, but you stand a better chance than with penury.

Lebergott poses a simple question for such critics: Would they want to return to 1900? Even if they say yes, in a democratic society would they be justified in forcing their aesthetic and moral judgments on other consumers? And if they say yes, they should carefully watch the recent BBC/PBS show called 1900 House or the PBS Frontier House. As modern families have found by trying it, life at the turn of the 19th century was hard, very hard, indeed. The idea that it was easy is one of our most cherished luxuries.

THE SOCIOLOGICAL DEFENSE OF OPULUXE

Economists aren't the only ones to crook an eyebrow at consumption scolds. Social scientists like Mary Douglas, Baron Iserwood, Mihalay Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton have put forward what are called the "good life definitions" of "positive sociology." While studies may show that people who purchase luxuries are not happier than those who cannot, they also show that being able to consume these positional objects seems to be a driving force in most large social groups. Call these goods whatever you want—bridge goods, heraldic goods, demonstration goods—the ability to have them seems to be restructuring communities. Happiness may not be improved by having luxe, but
unhappiness is increased by not being able to get into the supposed community of supposed peers.

It is now clear why modern transgenerational poverty is so debilitating. If who you are is increasingly what you have, then the have-nots are doubly distressed. For not only do the poor miss out on creature comforts, they miss out on community meanings. Whatever these meanings may be, they are superpotent and no longer culturally specific. No Berlin Wall can keep them out for long. This new definition of must-have luxury is spreading around the globe at the speed of, first, the television and now the Internet. As the last two decades of the 20th century showed, governments, religions and cultures neglect this unnecessary stuff at their peril.

We need to be reminded that luxury has a bright side as well as a dark side. Yes, luxury is a one-dimensional status and hierarchy marker. Yes, pecuniary emulation is still key for shallow social distinctions and contrived position. And, yes, such positional power is transitory. Opuluxe is one-dimensional, shallow, ahistorical, without memory, expendable. But it is also democratic and unifying. If what you want is peace on earth, a unifying system that transcends religious, cultural and caste differences, well, whoops! ... here it is. The Global Village is not quite the City on the Hill, not quite the Emerald City, and certainly not quite what millennial utopians had in mind, but it is closer to equitable distribution of rank than what other systems have provided.

WHY ACADEMICS CRITICIZE THE NEW LUXURY

Remember in King Lear when the two nasty daughters want to strip Lear of his last remaining trappings of majesty? He has moved in with them, and they don't think he needs so many expensive guards. They convince themselves by saying that their dad, who is used to having everything he has ever wanted, doesn't need a hundred or even a dozen soldiers around him. They whittle away at his retinue until only one is left. "What needs one?" they say.

Rather like governments attempting to redistribute wealth or like academics criticizing the consumption habits of others, they conclude that his needs are excessive. They are false needs: sumptuous, wasteful, luxurious. Lear, however, knows otherwise. Terrified and suddenly bereft of purpose, he bellows from his innermost soul, "Reason not the need."

True, Lear doesn't need these soldiers any more than Scrooge needed silver, Midas needed gold, the characters on Friends need stuff from Crate & Barrel, those shoppers on Rodeo/Worth/Madison Avenues need handbags, or I need to spend the night at the Luxor in Las Vegas. But not needing doesn't stop the desiring. Lear knows that possessions are definitions--superficial meanings, perhaps, but meanings, nonetheless. Without soldiers he is no king. Without a BMW there can be no yuppie, without tattoos no adolescent rebel, without big hair no southwestern glamorpuss, without Volvos no academic intellectuals, without cake no Marie Antoinette.

Professor Robert Frank tells a revealing story in his Luxury Fever: Why Money Fails to Satisfy in an Era of Excess. It seems a relative of his bought a red Porsche in France. When the relative returned to California, he found that the German car couldn't be retrofitted to meet the state's rigorous pollution regulations. He offered it to the professor at a fraction of its market value. Now, in Professor Frank's words,

I was sorely tempted. Yet my small upstate college town has a strong, if usually unstated, social norm against conspicuous consumption. People here are far more likely to drive
Volvos than Jaguars, and although ours is a cold climate, we almost never see anyone wearing a fur coat. At that time, a red Porsche convertible really would have been seen as an in-your-face car in a community like ours. Although I have never thought of myself as someone unusually sensitive to social pressure, I realized that unless I could put a sign on the car that explained how I happened to acquire it, I would never really feel comfortable driving it.

Professor Frank knows exactly what goods to buy and exactly what goods not to buy. He doesn't want to keep up with the Joneses or ditch the Joneses. He wants to fit in with the Joneses. He knows who the Joneses are. It's pretty much bow ties, Volvos and horn-rimmed glasses, thank you very much.

My point is--this is a social decision--not a moral one or even an economic one. He has decided not to define himself in terms of a red Porsche convertible. He wants what his consumption community wants. But this opens up such an interesting question, at least to me. Why have academics proved such myopic observers of the consumerist world? Why so universally dour and critical? And why can't they see that their own buying habits are more a matter of taste than degree?

Here, for instance, is Frank talking in Luxury Fever not about consumption per se, but about the anxieties of relative position. He is using his sons' behavior to illustrate the childish nature of competitive consumption. Read just a bit between the lines:

Having been raised as an only child, I have always observed the sibling rivalries among my own children with great interest. On returning from a friend's house, my 8-year-old son immediately asks, "Where's Chris?" if his 11-year-old brother is not in sight. When Chris is at his violin lesson, or at the orthodontist's office, we have no problem. But let him be at a movie, or just visiting a friend, the next thing we'll hear is Hayden's angry shout of "That's not fair!"--the inevitable prelude to an anguished outburst about the injustice of life.

Now, I don't know either Professor Frank or his sons, but I'll make a prediction. Here's what the boys can look forward to: straight teeth, plenty of soccer (not football), music lessons galore (preferably piano and violin), summer camp at Duke, magnet school or maybe a year or two at Deerfield, trips to Europe, four years at a private college or university or at one of the public Ivys (celebrated on the rear windscreen of the professor's BMW--not Volvo; remember he's in the B-school, not arts and sciences), and then postgraduate polishing. Nothing extraordinary about this expenditure of--what?--about $400,000 a kid.

What's extraordinary is that rarely, if ever, will Frank roll over at night and think he is spending foolishly. Never will he see himself as a luxury consumer, deeply embedded in a consumption community. No, to bobos like the professor (and me, I hasten to add), these choices have nothing to do with taste. They are needs, goddammit! Educational affiliations for academic offspring have nothing to do with the lawyer next door who drives an S-class Mercedes or the software designer I play tennis with, who sports a Patek Philippe wristwatch. Nothing! We're talking education here, not tail fins!

I think one reason we academics have been so unappreciative of the material world, often so downright snotty about it, is that we don't need it. Academics say they don't need it because they have the life of the mind, they have art, they contemplate the best that has been thought and said (plus, not a whole lot of disposable income).

But that's not the entire story. Another reason most academics don't need store-bought affiliation is because the school world, like the church world it mimics, is a cosseted world, a world in which rank and order are well known and trusted and stable. In fact, buying stuff is
more likely to confuse status than illuminate it.

If you are an academic, I instantly know about you from just a few words. Just say something like "I am a visiting assistant professor of sociology at Podunk U" and I can pretty accurately spin a description of what your life has been like. Give me a bit more, like a publication cite (not the subject, but where it appears), and you are flying right into my radar. This system of social place is so stable that you wear it like a pair of Gucci sunglasses or an old school tie. Little wonder academics are so perplexed by an outside world that seems preoccupied with social place via consumption. Little wonder we misunderstand it. I can't imagine what it would be like to tell someone I was a CFO of a pre-IPO dot-com. I'd much rather just have them check out my nifty chunky loafers from Prada and my Coach edition Lexus out in the driveway.

**FUTURE DISAPPEARANCE OF LUXE? MAYBE**

Most of us, yes, even academics, are living in a time of intense extropersonal relationships (in Latin extro means outward), in which the focus on things, on people as things, on relationships as things, defines modern meanings. Look at how we define relationships in economic terms:

Is he/she worth the trouble? Being invested in a relationship This relationship is costing me too much. Is he/she marriage material? Where's the payoff?

Cost-benefit analysis is second nature to our language because it is second nature to our perceptions, regardless of how far we are from the marketplace. However, we may be reaching the point where the center of such a system will not hold, things fall apart, and, like it or not, we find ourselves moving away from defining the self via goods, because positional goods have become too plentiful and thus not meaningful enough.

As so many luxuries become necessities, maybe the concept of luxury is being drained of meaning. As the standard of living has risen, erstwhile luxury is becoming the norm. Since the 1970s we have been defining luxury downward into ordinary goods and services, even as we have increased our ability to consume objects and sensations hitherto beyond our reach. Perhaps the social construction of luxury is deconstructing. Maybe we are indeed slouching toward Utopia.

The differences between top-of-the-line luxury objects, and the differences among various mid-range objects, have in many cases ceased to be observable. Perhaps we have overluxurified the commonplace.

When I mentioned the possible disappearance of luxury as a distinction to a friend who is the creative director of a large Midwestern advertising agency, his eyes lit up. One of his clients is a manufacturer of specialty faucets. When the agency tested images of kitchens that women felt reflected their sense of comfort and ease, the deluxe kitchen, complete with all the yuppie appliances, tested surprisingly low. What was high? The old-fashioned Kenmore-type kitchen, in which the appliances looked like what they were instead of pieces of commercialized built-in elegance. It was, he said, as if the women were tired of seeing themselves as perfectionists and yearned for the more relaxed life of their mothers or grandmothers. Restoration Hardware may really be on to something more than nostalgia.

Perhaps the mass class of consumers has been living in the lap of luxury for too long. We used to be outside looking in. Now millions of us are on the inside looking out. Who knows? Maybe the very ubiquity of luxury will cause us to recharge human relationships and deflate material values.
WAS IT WORTH IT?

So the question then becomes: Are we better off for living in a culture in which luxuries are turned into necessities, in which mild addictions are made into expected tastes, in which elegancies are made niceties, expectancies are made into entitlements, in which opulence is made into populence?

And the answer, from the point of view of those historically excluded, is yes. Absolutely, yes. Ironically, just as the very stuff that I often find unaesthetic and others may find contemptible has ameliorated the condition of life for many, many millions of people, the very act of getting to this stuff promises a better life for others. I don't mean to belittle the value of religion, politics, law, education and all the other patterns of meaning making in the modern world, but only to state the obvious. Forget happiness; if decreasing pain and discomfort is a goal, consumption of the "finer things" has indeed done what governments, churches, schools and even laws have promised. Far more than these other systems, betterment through consumption has delivered the goods.

But is it fair? Do some of us suffer inordinately for the excesses of others? What are we going to do when all this stuff we have shopped for becomes junk? What about the environment? How close is the connection between the accumulation of the new luxury and the fact that the United States also leads the industrialized world in rates of murder, violent crime, juvenile violent crime, imprisonment, divorce, abortion, single-parent households, obesity, teen suicide, cocaine consumption, per capita consumption of all drugs, pornography production and pornography consumption? What are we going to do about the lower sixth of our population that seems mired in transgenerational poverty?

These are important questions, but ones I will leave to others. Entire academic, governmental and commercial industries are dedicated to each of them. One of the more redemptive aspects of cultures that produce the concept of luxury is that they also produce the real luxury of having time and energy to discuss it. Who knows? Perhaps the luxury of reflection will help resolve at least some of the short-comings of consumption.

CONSUMING GOODS AND THE GOOD OF CONSUMING

My dad was an Episcopal choirboy, a fourth-generation Vermonter, a Harvard-trained doctor. We lived in a city on a hill next to a lake. We lived near the top of the hill, right next to his parents, who were just down from my great-grandparents. One day when I was about 10, Dr. Slavin came driving up the hill. He always drove a new black Cadillac, probably a Fleetwood. He stopped and chatted with my dad. Dr. Slavin was a prosperous obstetrician; in fact, he delivered me. He came from a small town in Vermont, had attended the local university, and was, in that perplexing term to me, a "self-made man."

In order to talk with my dad, Dr. Slavin pushed a button and the window automatically descended. I looked inside. Xanadu. Before he drove off, he opened and closed all the windows for me, automatically. I was amazed, it was a Daisy Buchanan Moment, a frisson of the Stendhal Syndrome. I remember asking my dad if we could have a car like that instead of the stupid green Plymouth. He said we could, but that we didn't need to.

My dad always knew where he was. He was never haughty, just confident. He was an atheist in midlife, but, my mother later told me, when he went into the hospital to die, he asked for the bishop to come by for a chat.
Of course, I regret the passing of that world. It had much I miss. I go for months now without hearing "noblesse oblige." Still, all in all, I like this new world better. I know to some it's the joyless economy, but not to me. I think it's quite joyful, and, moreover, I think it's far more fair than the world I grew up in.

Bowling alone is not a lot of fun. It's a lot more fun, however, than not being able to bowl at all. And given a choice, I'd rather be in the Prada league than the Junior League.

I don't mean to belittle current inequities. I don't mean to overlook racial profiling, sexual stereotypes, job discrimination, glass ceilings, unemployment, hunger. I only mean to say that romanticism, my erstwhile field of study, still informs much of the academic interpretation of commercialism. I am often reminded of something my mother told me. Her father ran a country store in the small town of Shelburne, Vermont. During the Depression he sold on credit. And how did he know to whom to extend credit? He did it by smell, aroma profiling. Smell of horses, good; cows, not so good; pigs and sheep, bad. Shelburne is such a pretty little town: church, library, town hall, community green. After the war, she and her siblings couldn't wait to get the hell out of there.

Let's face it: The idea that consumerism creates artificial desires rests on a wistful ignorance of history and human nature, on the hazy, romantic feeling that there existed some halcyon era of noble savages with purely natural needs. Close your Rousseau, open your Darwin. Once fed and sheltered, our needs have always been cultural, not natural. Until there is some other system to codify and satisfy those needs and yearnings, capitalism--and the promise of the better life it carries with it--will continue not just to thrive, but to triumph, Muslim extremists notwithstanding.

While you don't have to like needless consumption, let alone participate in it, it doesn't hurt to understand it and our part in it. We have not been led astray by marketers of unnecessary goods. It would be nice to think that this eternally encouraging market for top-of-the-line products will result in the cosmopolitanism envisioned by the Enlightenment philosophers, that a universalism of the new luxury will end in a crescendo of hosannas. It would be nice to think that more and more of the poor and disenfranchised will find their way into the cycle of increased affluence without contracting the dreaded affluenza or, worse, luxury fever. It would be nice to think that commercialism could be heroic, self-abnegating and redemptive. It would be nice to think that greater material comforts—more and more luxuries—will release us from racism, sexism, terrorism and ethnocentrism and that the apocalypse will come as it did at the end of romanticism in Shelley's Prometheus Unbound, leaving us, "Sceptreless, free, uncircumscribed ... Equal, unclassed, tribeless, and nationless ... Pinnacled dim in the intense inane."

But the globalization of the new luxury is more likely to result in the banalities of an ever-increasing, worldwide consumerist culture. Recall that Athens ceased to be a world power around 400 B.C., yet for the next 300 years, Greek culture was the culture of the world. The age of European exposition ended in the mid-20th century; the age of luxury markets may be losing steam in North America, but it is just starting to gather force elsewhere. Academic Marxists love to refer to this as "late capitalism." Early capitalism is probably more like it.

We have been in this lap of luxury a short time, and it is an often scary and melancholy place. This is a world not driven by the caprices of the rich, as was the first Gilded Age. Nor is it being whipsawed by marketers eager to sell crapular products. They contribute, to be sure. But our world is being driven primarily by the often crafty and seemingly irrational desires of the mass class of consumers, most of them young. In many ways this is more frightening. A butterfly flapping its wings in China may not cause storm clouds over Miami,
but a few lines of computer code written by some kid on his Palm Pilot in Palo Alto or Calcutta may indeed change life for all the inhabitants of Prague. Worse still, a Fendi purse or a Lexus automobile or a weekend at the Bellagio may be better understood by more people than the plight of the homeless, a Keats ode or the desecration of the rain forest. Whatever it becomes, the mass-mediated and mass-marketed world of the increasingly powerful information age is drawing us ever closer together. The act of wanting what we don't need is indeed doing the work of a generation of idealists. Terrorism is a perverse tribute to its power.

We have not been led into this world of material closeness and shared desires against our better judgment. For many of us, especially when young, consumerism is our better judgment. Getting to luxury is a goal. And this is true regardless of class or culture. We have not just asked to go this way, we have demanded. Now most of the world is lining up, pushing and shoving, eager to elbow into the mall to buy what no one needs. Woe to the government or religion that says no. They don't seem to last for long.

Getting and spending have been the most passionate, and often the most imaginative, endeavors of modern life. We have done more than acknowledge that the good life starts with the material life, as the ancients did. We have made consuming stuff, most of it unnecessary stuff, the dominant prerequisite of organized society. Consumption has become production, especially at the high end in the category of luxury. That we should be unified by sharing this material and the brand stories they tell is dreary and depressing to some, as doubtless it should be. Remember Oscar Wilde's observation that "the brotherhood of man is not a mere poet's dream: it is a most depressing and humiliating reality"? But one should not forget that the often vulgar, sensational, immediate, trashy, tribalizing, wasteful, equitable, sometimes transcendent and unifying force of consuming is liberating and democratic to many more.