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## **Discussant's Comments Hail, Hail Materialism**

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## DISCUSSANT'S COMMENTS

### Hail, Hail Materialism

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Let me start by saying that these are very good papers. They are careful, well thought out, and beautifully executed. As both sets of authors have noted, the philosophical traditions of materialism are long, complex and varied. The data do not fit ideologue's swollen form so smartly.

Having said that let me introduce some fairly heretical thought.

Suppose there is no such thing as materialism. By this, I mean that it is merely another -ism, socially constructed in the fine modernist tradition of the therapeutic ethos (Jackson Lears 1983, Marchand 1985). As such, it cannot meaningfully be separated from the traditional (meta-mantra) critique of modernity and market capitalism. It is the inevitable by-product of that discourse...and outside of that very particular discourse it is historically something different. As Michael Schudson (1984) so famously pointed out, there has never been a society that did not possess luxuries, or where things were just things. The entire human record consists of no place where materiality and luxury are absent. Such a place, such a time, are fictions. Tales of modernity's creation of materialism are a-historical and fictitious, but the flavor and nature of the critique itself is peculiar to modernity.

But is it not true that the modern marketplace, particularly branded objects, have brought materiality more to the center of society and culture? The answer appears to be, yes. Then, can we not discuss materialism in a meaningful way without running afoul of history? I think so, and I think these authors do that, but I still caution others.

So, just how meaningful is materialism, then? Should we care? How concerned should we be? Is this just an individual difference variable, normally distributed throughout contemporary society? Or, is it something much larger, something more endemic? Well, I believe it to be both, but the latter to be much more interesting. It is the historical trend, the epoch-flavored phenomenon, and the historically situated dynamics that really matter, at least to me. Of course, the really interesting questions are the political ones: who cares, how much do they care, and why do they care? That last one might actually keep you up at night.

Who benefits most from the charge and invocation of "materialism"? Given that all utterances are at some level political, there are beneficiaries to creating and sustaining -isms. I believe that we find our answer in those who have over time most often warned us about liking things too much, and jealously guarded adoration in general. Over the human record, it has most often been gods and kings who objected to materialism.. Gods and other rulers have historically guarded who and what one could worship. If one is to put no god before the real god, then the real god would have to be a jealous god...offering strict sanctions for the worship of things. Kings, by the way, are the same. They have historically preached against the people placing too much emphasis on things so as not to divert proper attention from just who should be worshipped and adored. This is Social Control 101. In American culture this institutional control is also deeply intertwined with our puritanical asceticism and guilt.

Further, all -isms are essential-izing. They reduce humans to pathology. The American Progressive movement used this to stigmatize a broad swath of human pleasures. And now, most post-modern puritans do the same.

Finally, if materialism exists...it may be a very good thing. One does not have to be Adam Smith to see the good emanating

from the pursuit of things.. Like it or not, things can lead to better and more pleasurable lives. Further, there is no pure pursuit of things...never has been, never will be... all material things come with meaning and social context. People never pursue just things.

I close by quoting James Twitchell (1999, p. 286):

*We have not been led into this world of material closeness against our better judgment. For many of us, especially when young, consumerism is our better judgment. And this is true regardless of class or culture. We have not 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. Woe to the government or religion that says no.*

*Getting and spending has been the most passionate, and often the most imaginative, endeavor 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 stuff the dominant prerequisite of organized society. Things "R" US. Consumption has become production. While this is dreary and depressing to some, as doubtless it should be, it is liberating and democratic to many more*

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