

## Notes and Commentaries

### THE ROLE OF MATERIAL GOODS IN SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT

**Author:** Lin Poyer

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I was delighted with the thought-provoking subject matter of this article. The author should be encouraged to develop her many themes further. As well as considering the role of material goods in terms of the *individual*, she could explore their role in terms of *society*.

First, there is the material, or empirical, importance of what society *does* with its wealth. Since the neolithic revolution, the use of that wealth has had a sorry record: expenditures on the military, the development of a leisurely class, etc. These evolved habits of spending are the very things that now prevent us from using wealth to promote peace. The institutional abuses of wealth and material goods should be explored in further research.

Second, the paper includes an examination of the symbolic use of material goods; it could productively take the issue a step further and explore the important collective use of wealth (cf. Mauss's *The Gift*). Bahá'u'lláh, after all, does speak of the goal of individuals to "carry forward an ever-advancing" society. For the past five years, there has been increasing interest in communitarianism in sociology: some sociologists even claim that the very premise of liberalism should be challenged for its undue attention to the role and importance of the individual. (An interesting review of several of these works appears in *Contemporary Sociology*, 18.2 [March 1989]:171-76.) When we combine all these perspectives with the December 1988 letter of the Universal House of Justice on individual freedom (*Individual Rights and Freedoms in the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* [Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1989]), we can see it is quite critical to include any discussion of material goods in terms of the collective.

Third, there is sociological importance in the transforming power of material wealth as it relates to human relationships and personal values. Simmel in his book, *The Philosophy of Money*, speaks eloquently on this issue: friendships, hurts, and relationships have become invested with a "value," which corresponds to the exchange of money. An extreme case is that of the Yurok Indians where every human transaction is measured according to a material value. The American litigation system uses a similar premise. The point is, of course, that it is not only goods which are objectified but also social relations.

Fourth, the connection between morality and wealth needs to be elaborated. For example, *The Embarrassment of Riches* by Simon Schama, an historian at Harvard, portrays the moral dilemmas posed by wealth in Dutch society during the Golden Age. Schama notes: "The very success of Dutch society, that material abundance which was the recompense of ordeal, was itself threatening when it reached the point of glut" (47) and "the moral ambiguity of materialism" (49). I admire this work for making me aware that the problematic relationship between materialism and spirituality has always been there. How does Bahá'u'lláh lead us out of this problem?

The whole problem of materialism-spirituality can thus be tackled on a number of fronts: empirically, philosophically, sociologically, and morally. The discussion, however, can be placed in the context of two historic processes: the separation of the material from the spiritual (which the author already treats) and the separation of the individual from the collective—two processes that could be the lead-in for a larger work on material goods and spirituality.

WILL. C. VAN DEN HOONAARD

From using western to promote freedom. The historical process of wealth and material goods should be explored in further research.

Second, the paper includes an examination of the symbolic use of material goods. It could productively take the same steps further and explore the larger, but collective use of wealth (cf. Mann's [1976] paper in this issue) as a symbol of the goal of individuals to "carry forward an ever-advancing" society. For the past few years, there has been increasing interest in community development in sociology; some sociologists even claim that the very purpose of the discipline should be changed for its major attention to the role and importance of the individual. (An interesting review of several of these works appears in *Community Development*, 13.2 [March 1982]: 171-76.) When we examine the work of perspective with the December 1987 issue of the *Journal of Bahá'í Studies* on individual freedom (see also *Journal of Bahá'í Studies* 1987), we can see a clear trend to include any discussion of material goods in terms of the collective.

Third, there is a historical perspective on the relationship between material wealth and spiritual relationships and personal values. Defined in this way, the Philosophy of Money speaks eloquently on the point; relationships and relationships have become inverted with a "value", which corresponds to the exchange of money. An extreme case is that of the York Indians when every human transaction is measured according to a material value. The material relation system does a similar exercise. (The point is, however, that it is not only goods which are exchanged but also spiritual relations.)

Fourth, the connection between morality and wealth needs to be explored. For example, the *Encyclopedia of Bahá'í Studies* by Simon Delany, an historian of Bahá'í history, points the moral dimension posed by wealth in Bahá'í social development. The *Journal of Bahá'í Studies* 1987, "The very essence of Bahá'í society, that man in abundance with the measure of order, was still deserving when it reached the point of the" (1977) and "the moral ambiguity of materialism" (1977). I believe this work has helped me to see that the problematic relationship between materialism and spirituality has always been there. How does this fit into an idea of the problem?