



Free Congress Foundation Commentary

The Next Conservatism # 48: The Next Conservatism and Materialism

By William S. Lind

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One of the odder phenomena of recent years has been the application of the adjective "conservative" to many things that were traditionally considered the opposite of conservatism. Thus we have heard "conservative" calls for America to become a world empire, regardless of the loss of liberties that may entail for American citizens. We have seen "conservatives" in Congress pile up record budget deficits, and we have listened to "conservative" economists justifying the de-industrialization of America's economy.

From a traditional conservative standpoint, one of the stranger examples of this confusion has been the notion that materialism, the idea that goodness or happiness comes from owning ever more stuff, is conservative. Vast, ugly McMansions, gas-guzzling SUVs, households that have more cars than people, the latest and most expensive of everything, most of it acquired by building up debt, are now supposedly signs that the nominal owners are conservatives. Each side, it seems, has adopted its characteristic vice as a virtue: for liberals, lust, and for conservatives, gluttony.

Earlier generations of conservatives would have been appalled by this mis-labeling. Conservatives looked down upon crass materialism and conspicuous consumption as marks of the nouveau riche and the snob. Happiness, conservatives knew, came not from piling up stuff but from doing the duties of one's station, with little thought of material reward.

No binge runs on forever, and as piled-up debt comes crashing down, one of the tasks facing the next conservatism will be putting materialism back in its place. A passage in a novel by Wendell Berry, A World Lost, offers a view of materialism that may be genuinely conservative:

Dick and Aunt Sarah Jane's two-room house at the edge of the woods, down the hill from the barns, was a part of the Home Place, but it was also a place unto itself, with its own garden and henhouse and woodpile. . . She kept house and gardened and cared for a small flock of chickens and foraged in the fields and woods and sewed and mended and read her Bible. In the mornings and the evenings and in odd times spared from the farmwork, Dick kept their house supplied with water and milk, meat and firewood. I remember their pleasure in all the items of their small abundance...

A "small abundance," abundance in the little things that make day-to-day life comfortable and generous, is consistent with the conservative virtues, which begin with prudence. A small abundance implies no competition with one's neighbors, no display, nor any wastefulness. One may take pleasure in such abundance without shame or guilt. It is an abundance open even to the poor, which Dick and Aunt Sarah Jane were by common standards.

The notion of a small abundance points to a broader concept I think may also be conservative, namely an intensive rather than an extensive valuation of material things. Previous generations placed a higher value on having a few things of high quality, things that lasted for generations and took on meaning from each generation to possess and use them, than on lots of "store-bought" stuff. People did not throw out their furniture every ten years and buy new. They valued the familiar over the "latest thing," the worn, hand-woven rug over cheap new carpeting, Grandma's black walnut kitchen table over flashy granite counter-tops. Their kitchens witnessed real cooking; it now seems that the more ostentatious the kitchen, the less food gets cooked in it.

As genuine conservatism values the past, seeks to learn from it and also to preserve it, these attitudes toward material things, which most of us know from the lives of our parents or grandparents, are pointers to us. They point us away from the wild materialism of recent years (one of my foreign students, a Hollander, said that "Americans are just Pac-man with legs"), not toward asceticism, but toward just that small abundance and deep appreciation of good, old things conservatives traditionally enjoyed. Things can have meaning, but they do not acquire their meaning from their price tag, less still from Martha Stewart. Their meaning grows from the skill and love the craftsman put into their making, and from the generations of people, known to us or unknown, in whose lives they played a part. Such things, like people, have memory.

So let the next conservatism make it plain: whatever the crass materialism and rampant consumerism of the present may be, they are not conservative. Nor, as the past teaches us, will they be long-lived.

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