



E DITORIAL

THE WORLD'S MATERIALIST SOCIETIES AND TAIWAN: A RACE TO THE BOTTOM?

David PENDERY

National Taipei University of Business Taipei, Taiwan

© The Author(s) 2023

Received: 29 June, 2023

Published: 30 October, 2023

Accepted: 15 August, 2023

Available online: 30 October,

A history is existent in the United States, the UK, and many other modern, industrialized, developed societies throughout the world, in which a new way of living and outlook on existence was evinced after WW II. Many would call this a veritable mythology, a new folklore, and sequence of norms, a dawn-of-a-New-Age moment into a materialist, consumer-driven worldview, a post-war boom that looked to introduce all that could be great in culture and economy, all that is beneficial to native citizens, families, migrants in new lands, and all others who live in developing countries.



This looked good on the outside, but to be sure there was more going on, and the dawn of the Cold War at this time signposted a new dark age in which entire populations would be driven into fear and suspicion, and a new covetousness and acquisitiveness exhibited an insubstantial outlook onto life and living. The new suburbs—showy, bourgeois displays of this new age—themselves indicated a new bromide and banality, a diminishment of communal values that had once been valued in family and civilization, and a step into an insulated existence which even warm, mom-and-pop hopes could not moderate and tame. In the midst of this, 1950s pop culture seemed to promise something bright—Elvis Presley and his like, many new movies that looked toward new ages in filmmaking, new poetry, and literature (to be examined below), dance steps that appeared brighter and livelier than ever—certainly appeared to aver this. However, such indicators were less than accurate. Even in the 1950s, rebellion was in the air, and the likes of The Movement in the UK and the Beat Poets in the United States undoubtedly showed how standard, emblematic, and oh-so-dull and carnal ordinary culture and its associated dynamic would soon be under full assault, and not long after, veritably removed from ordinary existence. Most people see this time as the end of one era in the world, and the beginning of something very different—an oncoming world of the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, and soon after that the likes of David Bowie, Punk music, and from there the 1980s and 1990s, a world of REM, Sinead O'Connor, Prince, Public Enemy, The Cure, Pulp, et. al. I seem to be focusing on music here, but to be sure the great poets and writers that emerged from the 1950s on—without doubt, the most important poetic/literary movements of the 20th century—also introduced great new ideas. In terms of citizens and the people, social movements from the Civil Rights Movement, through women's rights and environmentalism, to the dawn of Internet existence and social networking, through Occupy Wall Street and LGBTQA movements, to no less than the Sunflower Movement in Taiwan, showed how societies had changed immeasurably since the origins I have referred to.

With this introduction, I want to signify a feeling I have about life in the modern, industrialized, developed societies I have referred to, and their social coinage and philosophy in the present day. This is that, to me, these nations seem to be lavishing in something very like a backward 1940s-1950s social and economic life in which materialism and covetousness are the norms and source of all hopes and desires. An essential move to the cities and suburbs had led toward a monotonous, superficial sprawl, and a world in which civic life looks to be a lot less than fulfilling, with life in this world seeming to be a race to the bottom. Such a lifestyle can have any number of negative impacts on people, including children—who are unable to see a richer

and more rewarding world; teenagers who experience boredom, isolation, and frustration in this skin-deep existence; and the elderly, who experience much separation and in essence loneliness. How and why all of this is seen as the best and most satisfying lifestyle seems to be the big question.

Above I said that an approach to life like this is “backward,” and I will not step away from such a critique of the depthless existence that celebrates the corporal and cosmetic, and ignores that which is spiritual, poetic, philosophical, and yes, divine. From the people to the government, everything in these societies revolves around that which is economic, that which yields commercial, monetary gain, and all that is the worst about free-market, liberal economics—a given mercantilism, excessive market fundamentalism, deregulation, privatization, austerity, and the pre-eminence of the policies of international economic institutions (the WTO and the World Bank—no friends of ordinary citizens they). If I sound like a Luddite, forgive me, but to be sure a stout rejection of this preference for markets over community, churning economic inducements over cultural norms, and the above-noted values and institutions over collective action, has been seen in many of the best thinkers in recent years. The Washington Consensus, with its drive on commercial value and mercantile expansion, has driven any number of economies and world citizens into abject poverty, scarcity, and hardship. This “consensus,” fortunately, has been cast aside in world politics today—though you would not see as much in many countries, with their rage for a laissez-faire, neo-liberal, free-market, winner-take-all race to the bottom. Top to bottom you see this conservative thinking nowadays. Yes, as a teacher I may be basing my view primarily on what I see in university students, and to be sure virtually every pupil here is engaged in a utilitarian, hard-headed aim to get the best, highest-paying jobs they can get, with all the associated materialist gains (I suppose that many people would say this is not the worst goal for any average university student). A lust for the best motor scooters, houses far beyond their means, swanky trinkets and luxuries, and every bit of extravagance and opulence they can muster, is a constant goal of students and most other citizens all over the world. To raise my sights a bit, governors (to say nothing of celebrities and other well-known entities) are well-known for living lavish and excessive lifestyles—it’s seen as the best possible upshot in life.

I should probably pause to observe that many social movements have actually been quite active in recent years, evincing a much deeper view onto life than that described here. The Sunflower Movement in Taiwan noted above very much bespeaks this, and Taiwan’s very move into democracy in the 1970s and 80s very

much shows a committed and caring populace, plugged into the realities of their lives, seeking and creating positive change. This is to be sure true, and even today I am willing to acknowledge this actuality in Taiwan. But that does not change my essential opinion as described above, and my concern that Taiwan and other nations can and must seek something deeper in life.

And so, all of this is indicative of a trifling view onto life, a view onto only that which is rich, superficial, mechanical, and token—not that which is truly rich, significant, sacred, common, collective. I can only hope that the people of Taiwan emerge from this frivolous existence into something greater soon.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Contact Information

E-mail: q028jc@gmail.com