

This is an Accepted Manuscript of the following article published by Taylor & Francis:

Ian DeWeese-Boyd & Margaret DeWeese-Boyd (2007) The Healthy City Versus the Luxurious City in Plato's *Republic*: Lessons About Consumption and Sustainability for a Globalizing Economy, *Contemporary Justice Review*, 10:1, 115-130, DOI: [10.1080/10282580601157935](https://doi.org/10.1080/10282580601157935)
Please cite published version.

Abstract

Early in Plato's *Republic*, two cities are depicted, one healthy and one with "a fever"—the so-called *luxurious city*. The operative difference between these two cities is that the citizens of the latter "have surrendered themselves to the endless acquisition of money and have overstepped the limit of their necessities" (373d).ⁱ The luxury of this latter city requires the seizure of neighboring lands and consequently a standing army to defend those lands and the city's wealth. According to the main character, Socrates, war thus finds its origin in communities living beyond the natural limits of necessity. In short, the healthy or true city is sustainable, limiting its consumption to actual needs, while the luxurious city seems not to be sustainable, living beyond its needs in a perpetual quest for more. Plato spends the rest of the *Republic* in the attempt to reveal the political organization and virtues—in particular, the virtue of moderation—necessary for the luxurious city to be just, healthy and thereby sustainable. The contrasting images of the two cities and Plato's subsequent discussion raise important questions about the interrelations between justice, consumption and sustainability. In this paper we appropriate Plato's images of these metaphorical cities to discuss overconsumption and unsustainable practices by the nations of the contemporary "first world", which in turn perpetuate poverty and environmental degradation in the nations of the "two-thirds world". Matters of equity and justice are preeminent in our discussion.

I. Introduction: Our Luxurious Society

In recent years there has been a rash of books examining our love of luxury: *Living It Up: America's Love Affair with Luxury*, *Trading Up: The New American Luxury*, *Let Them Eat Cake: Marketing Luxury to the Masses - As well as the Classes*, and with *Affluenza* and *Luxury Fever*, the worry that this love of the luxe might be unhealthy for us and our society. Some examples include: Bill Gates spending \$6.5 million just for the swimming pool when building his \$2000 per square foot home on Lake Washington (Frank, 1999); steel mogul Lakshmi Mittal spending \$60 million dollars on a daughter's wedding (Hessel, 2005); and, Microsoft's Paul Allen and Oracle CEO Larry Ellison competing for the longest 400-and-something foot yacht (Chen, 2004). In a nation where more than one out of every ten persons lives in poverty, examples such as these make treatments on the topic appear warranted.ⁱⁱ In his *Republic*, Plato tells of a pair of cities: one devoted to the pursuit of luxury, to the idea that the luxurious life is the best life for the citizen and the city; and one devoted to the pursuit of the necessary, to the idea that the best life for the citizen and the city is the one in which the *needs* of all—as opposed to the excessive desires of a few—are met.

II. Plato's Two Cities

What can we learn about consumption and sustainability from the observations contained in these fictional cities Plato presents us with? Our goal here isn't to offer a comprehensive interpretation of Plato's *Republic* or even this specific passage, but to present his images of the healthy city and the luxurious one with a view to discovering what they say about the nature of community, consumption and sustainability.

Socrates and Glaucon on the Foundation of the City

The nature and origin of justice and injustice are what Socratesⁱⁱⁱ seeks in the *Republic*. Having been challenged anew by Glaucon and Adeimantus, his friendly interlocutors, to demonstrate that justice is something both desirable in its own right as well as for its consequences, Socrates suggests that the best path to discovering the nature of justice is to move from the individual, where it is hard to discern, to the city, where it will be easier to see, since there will be more of it there (cf. 368e).^{iv} By constructing a city in theory, Socrates and his friends hope to see where justice and injustice spring up in order to better understand its nature. Once its nature has been grasped in the city, they will be able to see what justice means for the individual.

Socrates' begins by laying the foundation for the city. Why do people come together to form communities in the first place? Socrates' answer is that alone we cannot meet our basic needs:

I think a city comes to be because none of us is self-sufficient, but we all need many things...And, because we need many things, and because one person calls on a second out of one need and on a third out of a different need, many people gather in a single place to live together as partners and helpers. And such a settlement is called a city...And if they share such things with one another, giving and taking, they do so because each believes this is better for himself. (369b-c)

The need in view here is, it should be noted, not simply economic. Socrates acknowledges that people might well live “not troubling to associate with others” (370a), minding their own business, as it were, but this life would not only be difficult, it would fail to meet other needs we have as human beings, for example, the need for companionship. Alone, survival is possible, but flourishing requires others. So, it is in our self-interest to live with others as “partners and

helpers” (369c). This principle regarding the basis of community is central to Socrates account of the healthy city, and for each permutation of that city to follow (Wilson, 1977).^v

Socrates and Glaucon on the Psychological Foundations of the City

At this point, we should notice how Socrates’ account of the city’s origin differs from the one Glaucon offers just prior to it. Glaucon argues that if people could have the benefits of injustice without the bad consequences, they would prefer injustice. “Justice,” Glaucon claims, “is between best and worst. The best is to do injustice without paying the penalty; the worst is to suffer it without being able to take revenge” (359a). People prefer justice only because they are too weak and risk averse to do injustice with impunity. According to Glaucon, people act justly because it is necessary, not because it is good; they are just unwillingly. For him, people come together not because they need each other but because they need protection from each other. Glaucon’s notion of justice and our motivation to be just is fundamentally negative. As Wilson (1977) argues, for Glaucon the primal relationship between human beings is predatory and exploitive; the city exists for no other reason than to protect its citizens from each other. The assumption that underwrites this conception of justice and the city is that human beings are “motivated at the bottommost level, solely by desires for pleasurable gratification of various sorts” (Cooper, 2000, p. 6). Accordingly, Glaucon argues that by nature human beings pursue their “desire to outdo others and get more and more (*pleonexian*) . . . as good” (359c). The fundamental function of the city and its laws, then, is to protect people from the exploitation that naturally follows from this unchecked pursuit of pleasure.

Clearly, Socrates’ city relies on different assumptions about human society and motivation. In Socrates’ view, human needs are best satisfied in co-operative community.

Accordingly Wilson (1977) writes, “The primordial social relationship is one of two-way co-operation, not one-way exploitation” (p. 318). Or, as Cooper (2000) puts it “Mutual aid, not mutual restraint, is the key to Socrates’ notion of justice” (p. 12). The motivation that underwrites this sort of gathering, as we’ve noted, is the desire for our own flourishing. We join together, according to Socrates, because we believe that doing so is better for us than seeking to be self-sufficient; we are motivated to help one another, in part, because we see that this is the best way to achieve our own flourishing.

The Cities Themselves

Now we are ready to look at the healthy and luxurious cities. The operative difference between these cities is that the denizens of the healthy city understand their needs as restricted to what is conducive to their good and flourishing. Or, more accurately, they only desire what really *is* necessary to their flourishing. Those who live in the luxurious city indulge desires that overstep the limits of what is necessary for their flourishing, either because they cannot control their excessive desires and thus give into them (*akrasia* or weakness of will), or because these desires have led them to hold false beliefs regarding their need and their good (motivated false belief or self-deception). In the latter case, their desires have enabled them to deceive themselves regarding their own good, believing that the unnecessary is necessary. James Twitchell (2003) devotes an entire chapter in *Living it up* to the role advertising plays in transforming luxury into necessity, leading to what he calls “the characteristic paradox of our time, the necessary consumption of the unnecessary” (p. 39). Socrates will argue that such consumption, driven by the desire of citizens of the feverish city for luxuries, is both unhealthy and unsustainable. Let us now look at the construction of the healthy city.

The Healthy City

Once need has been established as the basis for human association, Socrates and Adeimantus begin the construction of their healthy theoretical city, or, as Socrates points out, *need* will be its true maker. The smallest city is arranged around our needs for food, shelter, clothing, and shoes, and the arts aimed at the production of these things: i.e., farming, building, weaving, and cobbling. In the healthy city, labor is divided so that citizens can devote their attention to the arts (*technai*) that most suit their individual natures, rather than each trying to farm, build, weave and cobble for themselves, “not troubling to associate with others” (370a). Socrates argues that such specialization will provide more and better products for meeting people’s needs and that these products will be made with greater ease (370a-c). It also seems to be the case that such specialization is better for the artisans themselves, and not just in terms of ease and efficiency; being artisans disposes them to live peaceably with one another. To see how this is so, we need to consider in a little greater detail Socrates’ notion of art or craft.

The Healthy City: A City of Artisans

Each of the arts mentioned—farming, building, weaving, and cobbling—answers to a certain basic need. That is, each is essentially beneficial, and produces what human beings need to flourish. Farmers, for instance, have the ability to benefit others by providing them with something they need—food in this case—and this ability is what prompts others to enter into partnerships with them. The farmers likewise call upon other experts for their arts of building, cobbling or weaving. A fundamental feature of these arts is that they produce what is needed,

and as such are themselves aimed at benefit. According to Hemmenway (1999), it is this expertise that binds citizens together as partners and helpers:

since partnership is based on knowledge of how to produce a basic good, benefiting fellow citizens seems to be limited to, and a natural consequence of, having knowledge. . . . [K]nowledge of how to work with the physical world...allows them to produce human goods and thus disposes them to do good to others. (p. 275)

Another way that craft (*techne*) contributes to the health of the first city is that people devoted to an art tend to find their work intrinsically satisfying. The true cobblers find making shoes, and working with the materials necessary to their craft, absorbing—it is something they would engage in for its own sake, regardless of the money it earned them. To have an art in this sense is to be devoted to the process of making, not just to ends achieved by such making, e.g., the reception of goods in return for goods made. Such artisans have had to learn to submit to the materials with which they work, learning thereby not only the nature and limits of those materials but also of themselves.^{vi}

The artisan, then, because of the single-minded devotion afforded by the division of labor is made more apt to be a ‘just’ citizen in the sense of “doing one’s own work and not meddling with what isn’t one’s own” (433a) that we find Socrates arguing for later in the *Republic*. Insofar as artisans are absorbed in and rewarded by their own craft, they aren’t inordinately concerned to meddle in the affairs of others.

Moreover, the dignity of being excellent and skilled at one’s work plays a significant role in the flourishing and satisfaction one has in one’s life overall. Thus, a city of such artisans is one in which each person benefits not only by having her material needs met by others, but also in

having her needs for meaningful existence satisfied in the pursuit of an art for which she is naturally suited.

As we have noted, the people in the first, healthy city desire only what is necessary, only what actually contributes to their well-being. Now, it seems being directed by one's art plays a significant role in having and pursuing only what is necessary. Good and meaningful work to which one can be single-mindedly devoted appears to explain, in part, why citizens of the healthy do not have desires that go beyond what is necessary (Hemmenway, 1999). To facilitate the sort of focused attention these artisans require, and to enable the citizens to share what they have made, Socrates introduces a marketplace and currency (Cf. 371b). Those who run the marketplace are called servants rather than artisans and are people unfit for any work, marking perhaps Socrates' low opinion of this occupation, expressed throughout the *Republic* (e.g., 371c). It is important to see, however, that their aim is to facilitate the *sharing* of what people need; there is no indication in the text that they are seeking money in this endeavor (371b). Currency is used only to make exchange easier. The artisans will provide for their needs, just as they do those of everyone else. Furthermore, it is certainly possible to imagine this work being done with skill and devotion. So, it too might yield the sort of satisfaction other arts do.^{vii}

The Vision of the Healthy City

When Socrates asks Adeimantus where justice and injustice are to be found in this city, Adeimantus says he has “no idea . . . unless it was somewhere in some need that these people have for one another” (372a). Socrates suggests that they consider the sort of life these people will lead with a view of finding justice and injustice in this city. What follows is a rhapsodic description of a life lived according to necessity—one satisfied with what is sustainable.

They'll make food, wine, clothes, and shoes, won't they? And they will build themselves houses. In the summer they will work mostly naked and barefoot, but in the winter they will wear adequate clothing and shoes. For nourishment, they will provide themselves with barely meal and wheat flour, which they will bake into noble cakes and loaves and serve up on a reed or on clean leaves. They will recline on couches strewn with yew and myrtles and feast with their children, drink their wine, and crowned with wreaths, hymn the gods. They will enjoy having sex with one another, but they will produce no more children than their resources allow, lest they fall into either poverty or war.^{viii} (2004, 372a-b)

At this point Glaucon interrupts and says: "It seems to me that you make these people live without any relishes" (2004, 372c) To which Socrates replies:

True enough, I was forgetting that they will also have relishes—salt, of course, and olives and cheese, and they will boil roots and vegetables the way they boil them in the country. We will give them deserts too, I imagine, consisting of figs, chickpeas, and beans. And they will roast myrtles and acorns before the fire and drink in moderation. And so, they will live in peace and good health, and when they die at a ripe old age, they will pass on a similar sort of life to their children. (2004, 372c-d)

The people in this city produce what they need and find satisfaction in their work, in the consumption of necessities, and in feasting and worshipping together. They will, above all, live within the bounds of their resources, avoiding both poverty and war.

This city is inherently stable and sustainable. The citizens live within their means, each focusing with devotion on their art, producing only what is *needed*, that is, what conduces to individual flourishing. It is also notable that this city has no government. As Hodges and Pynes

(2003) write, “The first city is what might be called self-ordering . . . it is naturally well-ordered.” (p.175). Its citizens naturally defer to one another in the understanding and faith that in their individual devotion to their work they are providing for the needs of each other, the very thing they came together to accomplish in the first place.^{ix}

A City for Pigs: The Need for Luxury

Glaucon, Adeimantus’ fiery spirited brother, objects that this city is fit only for pigs; it lacks, as Socrates puts it, *luxury*. So, Socrates agrees to look for the origins of the *luxurious* city, despite the fact that the first city is the ‘true’ and ‘healthy’ one in his view (372e). The luxurious—or, ‘feverish’—city adds “all sorts of relishes”, among other things, “perfumes, prostitutes, and pastries” (2004, 373a). These things are specifically identified as *unnecessary*. We may quibble with the list, but the principle is what is salient for us here. Notice that while the arts that produce these luxuries may, in themselves, be good and satisfying in the sense we have noted, they are not similarly good for those who consume them, as they require consumption beyond what is necessary; neither these arts nor these artisans have the benefit of others as their aim. This city will also require those with an excess of resources and time to afford and consume these unnecessary things. Here we have the emergence of a consuming class. Concomitantly, there is also the emergence of what we might call fine art—art, that is, for entertainment or gratification, rather than use (373b).^x What is most interesting for us, however, are the consequences that follow from this dedication to the decadent.

In order to support the luxurious lifestyle sought after in the second city and the many more artisans it will take to produce the accouterments of such a lifestyle, more land will be

needed—which can only be acquired from the city’s neighbors. Socrates describes this process and its underlying cause this way:

[W]e’ll have to seize some of our neighbor’s land if we are to have enough pasture and ploughland. And won’t our neighbors also want to seize part of ours as well, if they too have surrendered themselves to the endless acquisition of money and have overstepped the limit of their necessities? (373d)

The endless desire for more gratification, *pleonexia*, which lay at the heart of Glaucon’s citizen, is here seen to be what leads to war (cf. 373e). The city, which was once sustainable, now needs more than its share to serve its bloated desire for luxuries.

Thus injustice and justice—neither of which exist in the first city—might well be seen growing up in the luxurious city, since, as Cooper (2000) argues: “justice requires not merely fair taking of turns, so to speak, but doing so with some countervailing motivation *not* to do it, or at least while recognizing that one might get something quite nice if one shirked” (p. 14).^{xi} The final consequence of the second city’s overconsumption is the need for an army both to protect the city’s wealth from others and to seize lands. The rest of the *Republic* considers this guardian class and the philosopher-kings that emerge from it. Now the city also has a nonproducing class that it needs to support, which in turn requires the other citizens to work even harder than before. Hodges and Pynes (2003) describe this luxurious city as “bloated and overpopulated. Having destroyed the land by excessive grazing in the production of meat, and having expanded its boundaries at the expense of its neighbors, it continues to be threatened by war and pillage” (p. 282). It is a city that is both threatened by and a threat to its neighbors.

Wealth and Poverty in the Luxurious City:

In surrendering themselves to the endless acquisition of money to service endless desires for appetitive pleasures of an increasing variety, the citizens of the second city become committed to wealth and luxury both of which Socrates argues in *Republic* book four destroy the individual and the city by causing citizens to abandon their art and so their ability to serve the city. In that passage, Socrates asks us to consider what would happen if we made farmers or potters as happy as can be, dressing them in fine clothes and decking them with jewels, telling them “to work whenever they please” (420e). He suggests we could do this for every citizen, making the whole city happy in this way. Call this the way of luxury. Socrates pleads with us, however, not to take this path:

For if we are persuaded by you, a farmer won't be a farmer, nor a potter a potter, nor will any of the others from which a city is constituted remain true to type. . . . [I]f our critic is making pseudo-farmers—feasters happy at a festival, so to speak, not in a city—he is not talking about a city, but about something else. (2004, 420e-421a).

Individuals striving to gratify their desires to the exclusion of their work fail to be citizens in Socrates' sense, since they are no longer devoted to providing for the needs of others through their craft. They have become primarily consumers. Luxurious living strips them of the meaningful and beneficial work to which they were devoted, replacing it with the constant pursuit of pleasure after pleasure, which inevitably leaves them wanting.

Not only is wealth destructive of the arts aimed at the good of city, Socrates contends in this same passage that *poverty* is as well (421c-e). Poverty is damaging to artisans by keeping them from acquiring the tools and materials they need for to do their work well (cf. 421d-e). Not only will their work suffer, but their ability to transmit their skills will diminish as well, resulting in worse and worse artisans, until presumably the art is lost altogether.

The conclusion Socrates draws here is that both wealth and poverty must be absent from the city, since wealth “makes for luxury, idleness, and revolution; and [poverty] for illiberality, bad work, and revolution as well” (2004, 422a). Such a city cannot be united in the way the healthy city is. Accordingly, Socrates argues that a supremely wealthy city cannot be a single city; it will be “two cities at war with one another, that of the poor and that of the rich” (422e-423a). It is crucial to see here that Socrates assumes that a city with great wealth implies a city with great poverty. Such a city also implies the impoverishment of outlying neighbors and the exploitation of natural resources, as the city bent on luxury requires land resources beyond its own. These observations about the instability, and the unsustainability, of the luxurious city shore up Socrates’ claim that it is a city with a fever, sick at its heart (Cf. Hodges & Pynes, 2003). If the city’s existence is predicated on meeting the needs of its population, yet some of its citizens live in gratuitous excess while others languish with needs unmet, the very foundation of the city is called into question.^{xii}

Lötter (2003) argues that

The *Republic* requires us to note afresh the negative and disruptive consequences that poverty and excessive wealth might have, not only for individuals, city-states, and . . . larger societies like contemporary democracies, but even the global village. Perhaps the strongest challenge coming from Plato is to critically evaluate our consumerist society to determine to what extent desiring and possessing excessive wealth still disrupts and destroys moral integrity and internal harmony of individuals and societies. (p. 205)

While Lötter is building his case from the whole of the *Republic*, the point is particularly apt in view of the contrast between the healthy and the luxurious city.

Are the citizens of the first city too unlike us?

A critical question regarding the nature of the citizens of these cities is the extent to which they resemble the citizens of any real-world human community. Some argue that the first city is rejected because its citizens just aren't like us.^{xiii} We all have the sort of unnecessary desires that characterize the citizens of the luxurious society. The project of the *Republic*, then, is to discover the best city for people like us. Such a city will have to address the unnecessary desires we do have and explain how they might be restrained or reduced to their proper proportion. As we said at the beginning, our project here is to look at these two cities as representing two extremes and to draw lessons from them, not so much to discover or consider Plato's answer to how we can approximate the first city.^{xiv} In our view, the most important thing to note in the first city is its modest size and commitment to good and meaningful work aimed at producing what is needed. Its economy is based on mutual aid through the devoted production of necessities. The human-scale, locally-based economy of the healthy city isn't aimed at the endless acquisition of money, as the second city clearly is. Money and trade only serve to facilitate the sharing of goods that first brought the city into existence. In the second, luxurious, city a population of wealthy consumers thrives, as well as a nonproducing aristocracy. This city runs on the overconsumption and overproduction of nonnecessities as well as the misuse of natural resources, yet is unable to meet the basic needs of all of its citizens. The consumptive 'fever' of the luxurious city results in violence and the exploitation of its own citizens, as well as its neighbors.

III. Overconsumption and Sustainability in Contemporary Context

Overconsumption, Inequality and Economic Growth

Let's now think about what lessons we can draw from the two ancient, theoretical cities.

Focusing on the second, more dangerous city: To what extent can we detect symptoms of that city's so-called 'fever' in contemporary American society? While the examples of hyperconsumption by the super-rich mentioned in the introduction to this paper are extreme, Judith Schor's book *The overspent American: Why we want what we don't need* (1999) describes the desire for status and the prevalence of overconsumption for the 'rest of us'. In other words, overconsumption in the United States is a much more popular phenomenon than we may want to admit. Industry moves, mines, extracts, shovels, burns, wastes, pumps and disposes of *four million pounds* of material to provide one average middle-class American family's needs for a year (Hawken, Lovins & Lovins, 1999, p. 51-2). In fact, conservation biologists point to overconsumption by citizens of the advanced industrialized countries as a significant component of the "human population problem" (Baltz, 1999). In order to reduce the stress on the world's resources, Baltz argues, "what is really needed on the planet is a reduction of the consumer population" (1999, p. 213).

A typical American family, for instance, consumes a disproportionate amount of the world's resources. It is estimated that the environmental impact of such a family is equivalent to 80 Costa Ricans and 280 Bangladeshis (Baltz, 1999). Similarly, the "resource demand index" of an average American is 67 times higher than that of an average Indonesian (Butler, 1994). If there are 5.5 acres of usable land and sea per person on the planet, Wakernagel and Rees estimate that we would need another five planets for all of the earth's people to consume what a typical American does (as cited in De Graff, Wann & Naylor 2001).^{xv}

It seems that we Americans have a burgeoning penchant for overconsumption: Our homes (Arnold, 2005) and cars (Gambescia, 2004) are larger than they were in the 1950s, even

though our families are smaller (Frank, 2003, p.21). We actually tend to have more cars per family than children (Gambescia, 2004). We consume an average 2,750 calories a day even though 2,200 would be nutritionally optimal (Gambescia, 2004). Indeed, the notion of ‘super-size it’ seems to have permeated the American diet, with two-thirds of us now overweight and one-third of us obese. The one thing we don’t seem to have enough of is space to store all of our stuff—hence the booming self-storage industry. In fact, there is enough self-storage space right now in the U.S. for every man, woman and child to stand inside a self-storage container at the same time (Arnold, 2005). What we can’t find a place to store, we simply throw away: “Americans spend more for trash bags than ninety of the world’s 210 countries spend for everything!” (De Graff, Wann & Naylor 2001, p. 85)

Our patterns of consumption in the advanced industrialized nations—or, the *overdeveloped* nations—have been deemed by some to be “profligate” (Baltz, 1999). Indeed, the most pressing environmental problems threatening the globe are the results of activities of these profligate nations in just the last half-century (Baltz, 1999). At the end of the 20th century, the United Nations Development Program’s *Human Development Report* (1998) focused on global consumption patterns. That report offered a bleak picture of disparate development and “unequal and unbalanced” consumption:

Well over a billion people are deprived of basic consumption needs. Of the 4.4 billion people in developing countries, nearly three-fifths lack basic sanitation. Almost a third have no access to clean water. A quarter do not have adequate housing. . .

Globally, the 20% of the world’s people in the highest-income countries account for 86% of total private consumption expenditures—the poorest 20% a miniscule 1.3%.

More specifically, the richest fifth:

- Consume 45% of all meat and fish, the poorest fifth 5%.
- Consume 58% of total energy, the poorest fifth 4% . . .
- Own 87% of the world's vehicle fleet, the poorest fifth less than 1%. (p. 2)

Given the finite resources of the world, we need to understand our current patterns of consumption in a more social and global context. Consumption is, after all, a fundamentally *social* activity—despite our individual experience of it (McMichael, 2000). A most obvious example of this relates to the environmental consequences of consumption. While the world's predominant consumers are those who live in wealthy nations and regions, “the environmental damage from the world's consumption falls most severely on the poor” (UNDP, 1998, p. 4). Consider how a booming fast food industry in the United States affected poor forest-dwellers in Costa Rica: as forests were converted to pasture lands to raise beef cattle for export, the peasants making their livelihoods off of forest products were displaced and what was a diversified local economy became a singularly-focused export economy. Due to the diminished supply of food for local purchase, the government found it needed to use some of the earnings from the export of beef to buy food staples. Moreover, now Costa Rican communities are particularly vulnerable to fluctuations in world demand for beef (McMichael, 2000). The social character of consumption in the contemporary world has a global reach. Thus, McMichael argues that globalization itself is “ultimately a local phenomenon” (2000, p. xxxvii). For, it is in local communities around the globe that the social, environmental, and political fallout of global consumption is borne (cf., UNDP, 1998). Thus, we fail to understand the inherently social nature of consumption to our own peril.

The relentless manufacture of need and the concomitant drive to consume in the United States is a significant outgrowth of the broader cultural and political infatuation with economic

growth as a public project. Korten (1996) states that “[p]erhaps no idea is more deeply embedded in modern political culture than the belief that economic growth is the key to meeting most...human needs” (p. 37). It is this logic that underwrites most development efforts in the two-thirds world. Yet many writers and activists argue that trade liberalization aimed at promoting global economic growth may actually fuel inequality within and between nations (cf., Black, 1999; Dahrendorf, 1995; Sernau, 2000; Frank, 1999, p. 238). In fact, the World Bank’s *World Development Report 1999/2000* (2000) suggests that the incomes of wealthy and poor countries continue to grow more disparate alongside increasing trade liberalization. According to Dahrendorf (1995), economic globalization “builds paths to the top for some and digs holes for others” (p. 24).

Although the two terms—growth and development—are often used synonymously, growth tends to connote increasing amounts while development might be understood to connote changes that pertain to improvements in the quality of life (Green & Haines, 2002; Kinsley, 1997). Such improvements might include changes in the use and distribution of resources, the quality of work available, and the responsiveness of institutions. Indeed, United Nations Development Programme studies in the 1990s suggested that most countries could meet the basic needs of their citizens without high levels of economic growth (Korten, 1996; cf., United Nations Development Programme, 1991). The Indian state of Kerala is sometimes used as an example of an income-poor region that appears to be doing well in terms of quality of life—e.g., high life expectancy, low infant-mortality, and a high rate of literacy (Franke & Chasin, 1995; Kapur, 1998). Moreover, if an equitable distribution of wealth were considered a marker of development, one would have to conclude that since the 1970s the United States has been a development failure. In sum, one can easily envision development without growth.

The distinction between growth and development points to problems associated with using GNP as a marker of “development”. GNP is inherently flawed as such a marker because it makes no distinction between better or worse uses of resources. Walking or riding a bike may be better for human and environmental health than driving a car, but neither contributes to GNP. Conversely, cleanup activities directed at the 1989 oil spill of the Exxon Valdez in Prince William Sound generated tremendous economic activity, although it was an environmental disaster. “And so we have before us”, Wendell Berry (2002) contends, “the spectacle of unprecedented ‘prosperity’ and ‘economic growth’ in a land of degraded farms, forests, ecosystems, and watersheds, polluted air, failing families, and perishing communities” (p.16)

In short, our unflinching faith in the promise of economic growth to promote human welfare may be misplaced. One study by Anand and Ravallion on the effects of economic growth on the quality of life indicates that the benefits of such growth are mediated through public expenditures on health and poverty eradication (Sen, 1999). Another finding concludes that while African Americans may appear to be doing well in global comparisons regarding income, as a group they are less likely to live to a mature age than many people living in income poor countries such as China, Sri Lanka, and parts of India (Sen, 1999). Korten (1996) argues

Without concurrent redistribution, an expanding pie brings far greater benefit to the already wealthy than to the poor, increases the absolute gap between rich and poor, and further increases the power advantage of the former over the latter (p.48).

In short, economic growth cannot be treated as “an end in itself” (Sen 1999, p.14).

Moreover, economic inequality isn’t merely a by-product of a global economy bent on increasing wealth: such a system is predicated on inequality and it generates inequality (Lummis, 2001, p. 46). Rich is a relative word—our fascination with it also implies a fascination

with poverty. This is because, as John Ruskin argued, rich implies poor just as north implies south (Lummis, 2001). Increasing the incomes of everyone makes no one richer—the rich get richer only when the poor get poorer.

Economic-development mythology is a fraud in that it pretends to offer to all a form of affluence which presupposes the relative poverty of some. Movies, television, and advertising originating in the overdeveloped countries idealize the lives of people who do less than their share of the world's work (because others do more), who consume more than their share of the world's goods (so that others must do with less), and whose lives are made pleasant and easy by an army of servants and workers (directly or indirectly employed). In an economy structured as a pyramid it is understandable that everyone might want to stand on top. But there is no way that positioning can be arranged. With everyone at the top, there is no pyramid, and no top. (Lummis, 1996, p. 71)

Any system built as a pyramid assumes both a top, and a bottom.

Inequality is also fundamental to much contemporary consumption. Veblen referred to this as 'conspicuous consumption'—i.e., consumption that is enjoyable specifically because it is relatively unattainable to most. A Rolex is a prized purchase only so long as it is not within reach of the *hoi poloi*. Over one hundred years ago, Veblen argued:

In the nature of the case, the desire for wealth can scarcely be satiated in any individual instance, and evidently a satiation of the average or general desire for wealth is out of the question. However widely, or equally, or "fairly," it may be distributed, no general increase of the community's wealth can make any approach to satiating this need, the ground of which is the desire of every one to excel everyone else in the accumulation of goods. If, as is sometimes assumed, the incentive to accumulation were the want of

subsistence of physical comfort, then the aggregate economic wants of a community might conceivably be satisfied at some point...; but since the struggle is substantially a race of reputability on the basis of an invidious comparison, no approach to a definitive attainment is possible. (Veblen, 1899/1931, p. 32).

Furthermore, as advertising firms know well, the desire for conspicuous consumption isn't limited to the wealthy. A good way to sell an unnecessary product to those with lower incomes is to market it as a symbol of affluence (cf., Danziger, 2005; Lummis, 1996).

IV. Conclusion: Inequality and Sustainability

Current patterns of overconsumption in advanced industrialized countries are not only inequitable from a global perspective, they are also unsustainable. Perhaps the best arguments for development based on a particular western model of economic progress and growth are pointed toward the prosperity of the nations of the two-thirds world. However, such prosperity—if likened to the prosperity of the American middle class—is both a “statistical absurdity” and an “ecological impossibility” according to Lummis (1996, pp. 68-9). First, such prosperity is a statistical absurdity because it would take the poorest nations a half a millennium to catch up to the current income levels of the world's wealthiest countries.^{xvi} Second, such prosperity is an ecological impossibility. It has been argued that it would take multiple earths for the cities of the world to operate at current per-capita energy usage of Los Angeles (Lummis, 2001, p. 46). In addition, soil degradation—along with deforestation, water depletion and other aspects of consumption-related environmental damage—is threatening “the earth's capacity to support human life” (UNDP, 1998, p. 35). Prosperity, as such, is simply not sustainable.

Further, even if current patterns of economic growth and consumption were ecologically sustainable, it would be a tough argument to make that they are politically sustainable.

Democracy—if construed in a sense more than figurative—requires a rough equality of fundamental material conditions:

...extreme economic inequality is not compatible with democracy. Either the poor will use their political power to plunder the rich, or the rich will use their wealth to disempower the poor. Of the two outcomes, the former is the more democratic.

(Lummis, 1996, p. 19)

The best insurance of a sustainable future are policies and practices that promote a broad and equitable distribution of the material resources of the world such that the political and ecological stakes in the welfare of our planet *of all the world's peoples* are recognized. After all, the problem of inequality, Lummis argues, is not a problem of the world's poor, but a problem of the world's rich. It is a problem that requires “a massive change in the culture of superfluity in order to place it on the path of counterdevelopment” (2001, 50). It is our view that the principles structuring Plato's healthy city—its commitment to the devoted production of human necessities—offers some guidance as we think about reforming what is clearly a city living beyond its needs.

Notes

ⁱ All quotations of Plato's *Republic* are from G.M.A. Grube's translation (Plato, 1992), unless otherwise noted.

ⁱⁱ 2003 Census data indicate 35,861,000 people in poverty in the United States, or 12.5% of the population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004).

ⁱⁱⁱ When we use 'Socrates' we are referring to the main character in the *Republic*, not the historical person from whom Plato drew inspiration.

^{iv} Socrates, at first, says he can't answer the challenge. “I don't see how I can be of help. Indeed, I believe, I'm incapable of it” (368b).

^v Wilson argues that the problem with the first city is that it ministers only to the bodily needs of its citizen, not their spiritual or moral needs. So, for Wilson, much of the *Republic* consists in determining

what human beings really need. While Wilson seems right to contend that need serves as the basis for society throughout Socrates' account, it is not at all clear that in the healthy city spiritual and moral needs are not being met. We take this point up below.

^{vi} Crispin Sartwell (1995) develops this conception of art as devoted activity pursued for its own sake and its relation to the good life in some detail in his *The art of living: Aesthetics of the ordinary in world spiritual traditions*.

^{vii} But, as Hemmenway (1999) suggests, it is the most morally ambiguous of the arts in this city; here, if anywhere, he suggests injustice might enter the healthy city. Also, among the non-artisans, there will be a class of 'wage-earners', people who lack the aptitude to be artisans. While not 'artisans' in Plato's technical sense, we might easily imagine such people doing well what they do, doing it with art, even if what they are doing is a mundane, relatively unskilled, activity. In this city, as Socrates is imagining it, it would seem that such people would also find a degree a satisfaction in their work.

^{viii} Poverty and war are both potential consequences of overpopulation and overconsumption. If a society has more children than its resources can support, either they will be impoverished, or the city will go to war to get the necessary resources for their support. One might also imagine a war among citizens who are impoverished and those that are not.

^{ix} Hodges and Pynes (2003) contend that this city, not the one argued for over the course of the rest of the *Republic* is the ideal city and the one that the historical Socrates would have preferred.

^x Plato's views regarding poetry and the *mimetic* arts in general is quite complicated. His worries about art, however, do seem to stem from their appeal to our desires for pleasure, or in this context, for luxury.

^{xi} As we have noted, however, there is real sense in which the essence of justice Socrates argues for latter, namely, "doing one's own work and not meddling with what is not ones own" (433a), is substantially present in this healthy city.

^{xii} For a detailed account of wealth and poverty in the *Republic*, see Lötter (2003).

^{xiii} The standard reading of this passage is that the first city is rejected because human beings really need or, at least, want more than it can provide and as such it is simply unrealistic. Cooper (2000), for instance, writes: "When Glaucon scornfully dismisses Socrates' minimal first city as suited only for pigs Socrates responds by expanding his city. He introduces what, as I mentioned, he calls 'luxuries' of all orts (372e ff.). In doing this, he is recognizing the presence in human beings, and the power, of desires for pleasures of all sorts . . . along side the basic Socratic desire for one's own good" (p. 14). The first city and its inhabitants, according to Howland, "are 'healthy' or well-ordered, but radically deficient in *eros* and *thumos* and so incompletely human; the Feverish City, which typifies existing cities, is fully human but disordered or 'feverish' in its erotic and spirited character" (1993, p. 88); see also Roochnik, 2003 for a similar point.). Hodges and Pynes (2003) offer a very different assessment of the first city, arguing on the basis of the *Statesman*, *Laws* and on Xenophan's testimony regarding Socrates that this first city is Plato's ideal, despite its it is dismissed in the *Republic*.

^{xiv} It is our view, however, that while it true that the citizens of the healthy city seem quite unlike us, the difference may have to do less with their nature than with the nature of their community. There is good reason to think that their manner of life, their devotion to good work for the benefit of others, plays a significant part in the shaping of their desires. If each person is wholly devoted to producing things necessary for the survival of the community, then there will be neither time to make nor to consume luxuries. Furthermore, if people find their work inherently satisfying, not drudgery, they may simply have no desire for such luxuries.

^{xv} The "footprint" of the average American is 30 acres (De Graff, Wann & Naylor 2001, p. 91).

^{xvi} Assuming fixed rates from the period of 1965-1986 of 2.3% for the wealthiest 20 countries and 3.1% for the poorest 33 countries (Lummis, 2001, pp. 45-46).

References

- Arnold, C. (2005, May 20). Americans keeping more possessions 'Off-site'. In National Public Radio, (Jonathan Kern) *All Things Considered*. New York: Public Broadcasting Service.
- Baltz, M. E. (1999, February). Overconsumption of resources in industrial countries: The other missing agenda. *Conservation Biology*, 13/1, 231-215.
- Berry, W. (2002, April). The idea of a local economy., *Harper's Magazine*, 304, 15-20.
- Black, J. K. (1999). *Inequity in the global village: Recycled rhetoric and disposable people*. Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian.
- Butler, C. (1994). Overpopulation, overconsumption, and economics. *Lancet*, 343/8897, 582-584.
- Chen, C. Y. (2004). A long yacht summer. *Forbes*, 149/12, 64.
- Cooper, J. M. (2000). Two theories of justice. *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, 74/2, 5-27.
- Dahrendorf, R. (1995). Can we combine economic opportunity with civil society and political liberty? *The Responsive Community*, 5, 13-39.
- Danziger, P. (2005). *Let them eat cake : marketing luxury to the masses – as well as the classes*. New York: Dearborn Trade.
- De Graff, J., Wann, D., Naylor, T. H. (2001). *Affluenza: The all consuming epidemic*. San Francisco, CA: Barrett-Koehler Publishers.
- Frank, R. H. (1999). *Luxury fever: Why money fails to satisfy in an era of excess*. New York: Free Press.
- Gambescia, S.F. (2004). Diet for a small planet? Fat chance. *America*, 191/4, 14-16.

- Hawken, P. Lovins, A., & Lovins, H. (1999). *Natural capitalism : Creating the next industrial revolution*. Boston: Little, Brown and Co.
- Hemmenway, S. R. (1999) The *techne*-analogy in Socrates' healthy city: justice and the craftsmen in the *Republic*. *Ancient Philosophy*, 19, 267-84.
- Hessel, Evan. (2005). Conspicuous consumption. *Forbes*, 175/6, p. 180.
- Hodges, D. C. & Pines, C. A. (2002, Spring) Plato's *Republic*: A tale of two cities. *Telos*, 123, 175-82.
- Howland, J. (1993). *The Republic: The Odyssey of philosophy*. NY: Twayne Publishers.
- Korten, D.C. (1996). *When corporations rule the world*. West Hartford, CT: Kumarian Press, 1996.
- Lötter, H.P.P. (2003). The significance of wealth and poverty in Plato's *Republic*. *South African Journal of Philosophy*, 22/3, 189-206.
- Lummis, C.D. (1996). *Radical democracy*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Lummis, C.D. (2001). Equality. In *The development dictionary: A guide to knowledge as power*, Wolfgang Sachs, ed. NY: Palgrave.
- McMichael, P. (2000). *Development and social change: A global perspective*. Thousand Oaks, Ca.: Pine Forge Press.
- Plato. (1992). *Republic*. (G.M.A. Grube, Trans.). Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing.
- Plato. (2004). *Republic*. (C.D.C. Reeve, Trans.). Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing.
- Roochnik, D. (2003). *Beautiful city: the dialectical character of Plato's Republic*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Sartwell, Crispin. (1995). *The art of living: Aesthetics of the ordinary in world spiritual traditions*. New York: SUNY Press.

- Schor, J. (1999). *The overspent American: Why we want what we don't need*. NY: HarperPerrenial.
- Sen, A. (2000) *Development as freedom*. New York, Anchor Books.
- Sernau, S. (2000). *Bound: Living in the globalized world*. Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian.
- Silverstein, M. J., Fiske, N. (2003). *Trading up: The new American luxury*. New York: Portfolio.
- Twitchell, J. B. (2003). *Living it up: America's love affair with luxury*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- United Nations Development Programme. (1998). *Human Development Report 1998*. NY: Oxford University Press.
- United States Census Bureau. (2004). *Income, poverty, and health insurance coverage in the United States: 2003* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office).
- Veblen, T. B. (1931). *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. NY: Viking. (Original work published 1899)
- Wilson, J.R.S. (1977). The basis of Plato's society. *Philosophy*, 52, 313-20.
- World Bank. (2000). *Entering the 21st century: The world development report 1999/2000*. NY: Oxford University Press.