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978-0-521-46691-2 - The Idea of Luxury: A Conceptual and Historical Investigation

Christopher J. Berry

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In this far-ranging and innovative study Christopher Berry explores the meanings and ramifications of the idea of luxury. Insights from political theory, philosophy and intellectual history are utilised in a sophisticated conceptual analysis that is complemented by a series of specific historical investigations. Dr Berry suggests that the value attached to luxury is a crucial component in any society's self-understanding, and shows how luxury has changed from being essentially a negative term, threatening social virtue, to a guileless ploy supporting consumption. His analytic focus upon the interplay between the notions of need and desire suggests that luxuries fall into four categories – sustenance, shelter, clothing and leisure – and these are exemplified in sources as diverse as classical philosophy and contemporary advertising.

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# THE IDEA OF LUXURY

*A conceptual and historical investigation*

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*To  
Craig Adrian and Paul Duncan  
and  
Christine*

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## *Preface*

As its title indicates this study is a mixture of historical investigation and conceptual analysis. The focus of the latter is upon the interplay between the notions of 'need' and 'desire'. The former limns out certain crucial episodes in the intellectual career of the idea of luxury. To say that the investigation is 'episodic' is to admit, implicitly, that no attempt at an exhaustive survey is being attempted. Baudrillard tried that in the late nineteenth century and produced four enormous volumes of which, even if it is a truculent exaggeration, Sombart's judgment that one learns from it almost nothing, does suggest that both a more selective and more focused approach is warranted. My conceptual analysis is intended, in part, to assist to that end. Of course, any 'episodic' treatment leaves itself open to cavils about inclusions and exclusions; certainly a strong case can be made for giving Aristotle and, especially, Rousseau more prominence than they will actually receive in what follows.

One other book deserves a mention at this point. John Sekora has written a good book on the idea of luxury to which I am indebted more than my relatively few references might indicate. My task, however, is different from his. Sekora's own agenda was to fill in the intellectual/historical background to a study of Smollett; my concerns are less chronologically specific as well as being in a general sense more 'political'. At its broadest, my investigation and analysis of luxury is undertaken because the topic provides an illuminating entrée into a basic political issue, namely, the nature of social order. That issue is itself clearly very general and what makes luxury so potentially illuminating is that it, as a topic, straddles various academic disciplines, bringing together issues of philosophy, history, anthropology, theology and economics as well as politics. This should not be taken to mean that the study of luxury is of only instrumental value. It is also an intrinsically worthwhile subject. This worth lies



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partly in an account of why it is indeed apparently so ubiquitous, cropping up in these various disciplines. It lies also in the change in contextual meaning that the term has undergone. In its own way it acts as a barometer of the movement from the classical and medieval world-view to that of modernity. Of course it shares that role with many other notions – reason and nature to name but the two most dramatic.

As a response to the topic's wide-ranging quality, this study quite deliberately adopts an eclectic mode of investigation and analysis. Hence I provide some detailed textual analyses, of Plato and Barbon for example, as well as undertaking some synoptic overviews, of post-Augustinian Christianity and the Enlightenment for example. For the same reason, I draw upon disparate sources of evidence, ranging from contemporary commercial advertising to analytical philosophy to histories of Gothic architecture to regulations governing the taxation of children's clothing. My hope is that this constitutes not a confusing mish-mash but rather a mosaic, which when assembled or taken together reveals some design.

This eclecticism in its own way supposes certain methodological claims. Since it appears to have become a virtual requirement to make some comments about such claims, I here wish to enter two general disclaimers. The requirement itself seems to be a product of a commendable self-consciousness, so much so that 'the methodology of the history of ideas' has become an area of study in its own right, generating its own debates and canon – Lovejoy, Gadamer, Koselleck, Pocock, Skinner *et alii*. My initial disclaimer is that I am not participating directly in these discussions. The reason for this diffidence is that I do not wish the methodological tail to wag the substantive dog. I am not here engaged in treating luxury as a test-case for evaluating, say, the tenability of *Begriffsgeschichte*. Of course, as I have allowed, I cannot but make certain methodological commitments. Since I am interested in the changing 'place' of luxury within societal self-understandings of the nature of social order, then it is because these are *understandings* that the investigation focuses on broadly conceptual issues. And it is because of this focus that the historical dimension concentrates (episodically) upon what I called above its 'intellectual career'. In line with my eclecticism, how this 'career' is mapped in the different episodes varies but there is a general acceptance of the view that it is contemporary understandings, implicit and explicit, that constitute the most appropriate context.

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I earlier characterised my eclecticism as constituting a mosaic. A mosaic is not a seamless web – there are observable joins, which, indeed, become more obvious the closer one looks. What this means in practice, and here is my second disclaimer, is that the juxtaposition of, say, analytical philosophy, contemporary unreflective usage and historical investigation is not so integrated that one blends indiscernibly into another. What I do attempt to do is bring the various aspects to bear on each other when I believe mutual enlightenment will ensue. The appropriate judgment is the extent to which, more or less, this works, not the fact that the join is discernible.

The book is divided into four Parts. The first utilises contemporary popular usage to provide a general framework. Building upon an analysis of the differences between needs and desires, I claim that luxuries fall into four categories. I also introduce or ‘signpost’ various issues and themes which are taken up in later chapters. Part II consists of three chapters – on Plato, the Romans and early Christianity – which together establish the ‘classical paradigm’. Within this paradigm luxury is a pejorative term because it stands for the corruption of a virtuous manly life. Part III also consists of three chapters. These chart the ways in which luxury becomes ‘de-moralised’ (Chapter 5), its links with the vindication of a commercial society in the work of Smith and others (Chapter 6) and the impact upon the paradigm of a general shift toward the historicisation of values (Chapter 7). The final Part returns more openly to conceptual analysis and contemporary issues.

In Part IV, Chapter 8 deals with the intersections between luxury and necessity as manifest in taxation policy and debates over the meaning of poverty. This chapter also re-addresses the issue of luxury’s pejorativeness. The final chapter deals abstractly with the way the distinction between luxury and necessity informs the ideas of social order and social identity. Although the various chapters are grouped in this way, they do to some extent stand on their own. However, this book is not intended to be a set of nine discrete essays – certain inter-linking themes are overtly present and others are to be discerned (I hope) as the mosaic and overall design takes shape.

Serious work on this study was begun when I was awarded an ESRC Personal Research Grant (E 00242057). This provided me with an academic year free of teaching and administration and enabled me to break the ground so that this book might in due course come forth. I am grateful to the ESRC for providing me with this

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opportunity and to all those who were instrumental in my gaining the grant. The basic outline and substance of the book were completed by the end of 1991. The following year was spent upon elaborating and some re-thinking, aided by the helpful comments of two anonymous readers. At other times, and in some very different guises, some of the themes and arguments herein have benefited from comments received in Edinburgh, York, Oxford as well as Glasgow. Earlier workings of Chapter 2, Chapter 3 and part of Chapter 6 appeared, respectively, in *Polis* 8 (1989), *History of Political Thought*, vol. 10, pp. 597–613, © 1989 Imprint Academic, Exeter, UK, and *Virtue (Nomos 34)*, J. Chapman and W. Galston (eds.), © New York University Press, 1992. I am grateful for permission to re-utilise this material. Between its inception and completion both my parents died and I dedicate this book to their two grandsons, and to Christine, again.