Luxury
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Elizabeth Wilson

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Luxury

Elizabeth Wilson
Independent researcher and writer

ABSTRACT This article puts forward a number of propositions about what 'luxury' is or is perceived to be in different contexts.

KEYWORDS: luxury, self-indulgence, expensive, lust

Elizabeth Wilson began her writing career in the "underground" magazines in the 1970s, writing about politics and feminism. She was a researcher and lecturer at several universities. Her published non-fiction works include: *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity* (1985, 2002); *The Sphinx in the City* (1993); *Bohemians: The Glamorous Outcasts* (2000); and *Love Game: A History of Tennis from Victorian Pastime to Global Phenomenon* (2014). She is also the author of three period crime novels, *The Twilight Hour*, *War Damage* and *The Girl in Berlin*, with a fourth forthcoming next year. mail@elizabethwilson.net

Luxury: OED, o.f. luxurie, lat. luxuria.
Abundance, sumptuous enjoyment.

In Latin and in the romance languages the word connotes vicious indulgence, the neutral sense of the English, "luxury" being expressed by lat. *luxus* and fr. *Luxe*.

1. Lasciviousness, lust.
2. Luxuriance, superabundant growth or exuberance.
3. The habitual use of or indulgence in what is choice or costly, whether food, dress, furniture or appliances of any kind.
4. Refined or intense enjoyment.
5. (a) means of luxurious enjoyment …
   (b) in particularized sense: Something which conduces to enjoyment or comfort in addition to what are accounted the necessities of life. Hence in recent use, something which is desirable but not indispensable.

I buy a box of "luxury chocolates." Here the meaning of luxury is that the chocolates are made from 70 percent cocoa rather than from margarine or pig's fat, in other words they are "real" chocolates, not sub-standard imitation chocolates. They are "normal" chocolates. The use of the word "luxury" implies that the norm would be ersatz chocolates and that it is a luxury to purchase some that would more accurately be described as standard or normal chocolates, the minimum one should expect from such a purchase (Figures 1 and 2).

On the other hand, in contemporary culture, chocolate of any kind already symbolizes luxury and self-indulgence. It is as the dictionary suggests, not "indispensable." Indeed, it is often discussed in terms of an addiction and advertisements for chocolate deploy images suggestive of "lust."

Chocolate was, on the other hand, included in iron rations for soldiers on the march, in action or on fatigues. Its caffeine and fat could sustain the army over long periods.

It is also possible, by the way, to order your own bespoke chocolates. They can be flavored with anything you like – tobacco, caviar, strychnine, you name it – but cost well over £100 for a small box.

I book into a "luxury" hotel. In this case, luxury equates with expensive. The room is comfortable and large enough to be furnished with a desk in the window, there are "toiletries"' of an expensive brand in the bathroom (en suite of course) and there is an enormous choice of food at breakfast. There is also a spa, a gym and a (small) swimming pool. I have to wait rather a long time for room service, which when it arrives is somehow not quite what I wanted.

Figure 1
The Royal Chocolate Making Kitchen at Hampton Court Palace, the domain of Thomas Tosier personal chocolatier to King George I. Credit: Victor Frankowski/ REX.

Figure 2
Model Penny Van Hoorn with what was then in 1962 the world's biggest box of chocolates. Credit: Reg Warhurst/Daily Mail/REX.

I read that the Mid-town Hilton in Manhattan has abolished room service. Guests must now fetch for themselves anything they may wish to eat in their rooms.

I still wonder if it is a luxury not to be crammed into a room the size of a cupboard. I remember that there exist homeless families living five in a hotel room, and in hotels that were not "luxury" hotels in the first place.

"*Luxuria*" in Latin is translated as lust. In contemporary usage luxury translates as merely expensive, a "luxury brand" costing more than a standard brand. "Lust" implies a longing for something, even a passion for something, possibly something forbidden, for "lust" has inescapably negative implications.

It is on the face of it rather surprising that a learned journal devoted to the subject of luxury should be launched at a time of national and international austerity. Is luxury the opposite of austerity?

The "austerity period" in Britain after the Second World War – roughly from 1946 to 1952 when all rationing ended – was a period in which at least theoretically all classes of society shared in the shortages and worked hard to repay the country's debts to the USA and also to create wealth for investment in the newly expanded welfare state. In practice diaries of the period record slap-up meals of game and other delicacies at the Ritz, so evidently privation did

not fall equally on all; however, these were not widely broadcast and many persons may have been unaware of some of the differences. The black market flourished, but those who used it were disapproved of (perhaps hypocritically).

Surveys show that as the next British general election slides nearer the majority again seem to assent to the necessity of the austerity regime, although the arguments against it are clearer and more often raised. What has changed is that the reality of austerity lurches alongside widespread awareness of luxurious excess as an international class of the super-rich floats above the landscape like the angels depicted in Renaissance paintings. I am surprised there is not more resentment of plutocrats digging out basements in Kensington and purchasing £25 million (or is it £250 million?) penthouses in Knightsbridge, but perhaps that is because they do really appear as supernatural beings, to whom the normal laws of existence – and gravity – do not apply. They appear more as figures in celebrity entertainment culture than real socio-economic actors. The audience anchored to the ground and gazing up into the celebrity clouds reads about them in *Hello!* magazine or *Heat* or, indeed, in the *Financial Times*. They might as well be characters in a soap opera.

I have long been of the view that the whole construction of theories of the Postmodern, Postmodernity and Postmodernism was a massive *trahison des clercs*, whereby a generation of "Bobos" was flattered into believing that the investigation of largely popular taste was an appropriate substitute for a serious analysis of what underlay it. (Bobos was the label cleverly invented by right-leaning American cultural critic David Brooks to describe how the bohemian values of hippies and radicals mutated into a bourgeois way of life in which radical and avant-garde taste replaced radical politics.) It was such fun to celebrate the marvellous excess of the New Romantics and their recession chic (a phrase invented by Angela Carter). Gender benders were subversive; they were transgressive (favoured words of the period). We all wound up the transgressive spiral, ignoring the warning of Michel Foucault, who pointed out that all this led to was an endless corkscrew. In which case, transgression and the analysis of transgression may have been an intoxicating intellectual luxury, which, like chocolate, was an inadequate substitute for a balanced diet, at least in the long run. It was not that the analysis and interpretation of soap operas and "trashy" films were not revealing or without significance, but rather that the end result was contemplation rather than action. The exposure of deep-seated seams of hatred of women, of migrants, of all and any "others" seemed to result in resignation rather than rage, or to that "left wing melancholy," which Walter Benjamin described as "the transposition of revolutionary reflexes … into objects of distraction, of amusement, which can be supplied for consumption" and turns "the yawning emptiness into a celebration" (Benjamin 1999: 424).

My daughter points out that, for her generation, now in their twenties, and the next one after that, higher education has turned out to be a luxury, as the jobs commensurate with their education no longer exist. Just as the working class, the old proletariat, has been pushed downwards, de-organized and de-skilled, so is this now happening to the "squeezed middle," bureaucratic managerial hierarchies replacing professional autonomy and short-term contracts replacing work security.

The curious paradox of contemporary society, in Britain at least, is the elevation of work into the paramount good, especially at a time when there is a dearth of it – you might almost say that for some sections of society work has become the greatest luxury.

That aside, work is elevated into the sole measure of worth, purpose and virtue. The idea that education could be about learning for learning's sake has become morally and above all politically suspect as well as deeply old-fashioned and out of touch; on the contrary, the purpose of educating the young is so that they are prepared for "the world of work," which has become the only world worth considering. Even pastimes and activities that were formerly thought of as forms of pleasure have become forms of work, the most obvious example being sports of all kinds. In tennis, once a field of relaxation and enjoyment for the middle and upper classes, such notions have been replaced in a sport that has become a gruelling form of work, with Andy Murray boasting that he spends months training in a Florida "boot camp." It evidently paid off in his case, but whether it is worth it to see a game of elegance and beauty transformed into a metronomic war of attrition is another matter.

"My one little luxury": when this phrase is deployed it refers to self-indulgence and the fact that to indulge oneself is still so fraught with guilt reminds one how puritanical "our" culture is. To the early Victorian evangelicals even coffee and tea were sinful, not to mention music, novel-reading and dancing, with beyond that the demon drink and worse. Pleasure is always suspect. Lenin loved music, but stopped listening to it because it made him feel soft, loving and vulnerable, the opposite of the qualities needed by a fully paid up revolutionary. Paradoxically – or inexplicably – a common stereotype of the German Nazi is of one deeply devoted to classical music. He listens to Beethoven while plotting mass extermination.

Music itself is possibly one of the greatest luxuries. Yet mechanical reproduction has transformed it into a necessity – or so you might think, from the number of persons plugged into the little machines containing the playlist of "my music" to provide a soundtrack for everyday life. Listening to music used to be a solemn occasion that necessitated a journey to concert hall or church. Then it became a still fairly serious ceremony in the home as the gramophone was

cranked up and the family gathered round to listen to five minutes of melody or song. Today it is sometimes hard to get away from: classic ballads or jazz piped out in cafes, snatches of famous classics in an advertisement (the Harrods sale – "There is only one Harrods – there is only one Sale – used to be announced with the final chords of a Bach aria), Stepford Wives muzak in the supermarket.

The rich had access to music. Bach composed his Goldberg Variations in order to help his patron relax and then sleep. Marcel Proust invited a famous quartet of the period to his apartment to have them play his favorite piece of music. His biographer, George Painter, describes how Proust attended a performance of César Franck's string quartet in D major and afterwards begged the four musicians to return home with him and play it again. On the appointed day, Proust collected them one by one at midnight in a taxi and, arriving at his flat, he lay on his bed with the sheets of his novel *A La Recherche du Temps Perdu* scattered around him. The acoustics in his cork-lined room were superb. When it was finished, Proust entreated: "Would you do me the immense kindness of playing the whole work again?" And Painter relates that the quartet, "fortified with champagne and fried potatoes … did as he asked and Proust, with cries of delight and congratulations, paid them on the spot from a Chinese casket stuffed with fifty-franc notes. (Each musician was paid 150 francs.) Four taxis awaited them in the blacked-out street below." (It was the middle of the First World War.) Several further nocturnal concerts were organized (Painter 1965: 243).

Proust, who lived in the Boulevard Haussmann, also had an elaborate arrangement whereby performances of the opera were relayed to his apartment; or so I thought I remembered reading, but I could find no mention of this in Jean-Yves Tadié's definitive biography, so I may have made it up. Even if I did, it illustrates the theoretical expense and luxury of music in the age just before the advent of the mechanical reproducibility of music on a mass scale.

Proust's freedom to organize his own private concert with his favourite music played by the foremost French quartet of the period, and in wartime, provides a good example of true luxury. It is not just a question of money, although that is a necessary precondition. Proust also had to have the necessary taste and knowledge of music to persuade the cellist, to whom he spoke in the first place, that he was not just some crank. He also had to have the charm and the chutzpah to make the approach – and Proust was famous for his charm.

The anecdote illustrates several components of luxury. To me it is significant in exposing the component of personal service involved. Can anything be more luxurious than being "waited on hand and foot?" This is a rather undemocratic and for that matter politically incorrect observation. To say that the greatest luxury is to have servants – or possibly slaves – can surely not be the conclusion I was

hoping to reach. And of course, there is a very much darker version of the story of Proust's quartet: the commander of Theresianstadt concentration camp, where many distinguished artists and intellectuals were imprisoned, organized his own string quartet from among the inmates, who played at his behest and for his pleasure.

But servants themselves have changed. To revert to an earlier example, Andy Murray employs a coach, hitting partner, physiotherapist and so on; yet these are not servants in the old sense. Rather, they form a kind of gang, mates, even an extended family.

In Proust's case, his life was run by Céleste Albaret, the wife of his chauffeur. Céleste was totally devoted to him. With her husband at the front, she adapted herself completely to Proust's nocturnal way of life and used to sit up all night talking with him as well as providing for all his exacting needs (mostly coffee at exactly the correct heat and with the correct amount of milk added). She adored him and was devastated when he died; it was as if her life were over too.

An alternative model of devotion would be a stereotype of the traditional wife. Yet this example serves to reveal that the total devotion of another individual could conceivably become an oppressive burden. Too much adoration could pall – perhaps for both parties.

Proust's greatest luxury, however, was time. He was a rentier who never earned his living and was supported by his father, who made sure he was financially independent. Money is an important component of luxury. As the art historian Kenneth Clark expressed it: "My parents belonged to a section of society known as 'the idle rich', and although … many people were richer, there can have been few who were idler" (Clark 1974: 1). But although wealth – sufficient money – is a component of the luxury of "free time" it is not wholly dependent on it. There have been artists and others who had almost no money yet who managed to carve out a life not enslaved to work, who managed to create "free time"; "leisure."

In an age of the worship of work, then, it may well be that the greatest luxury is to be defiantly idle. Whether "benefit scrounger" or trustafarian, yours is the luxury of doing absolutely nothing.

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