

Introduction: 'The Materialist Turn'

Winfried Fluck and Leo Marx

We are storytelling beings and define ourselves through narratives. One of the most persistent and influential stories told about "America," both inside and outside its borders, is that it narrates how it ushered in and accelerated a historical turn towards materialism. The following essays take this claim as their point of departure, but also ask how convincing this particular narrative really is. For clearly, as Miles Orvell points out in his paper, to speak of a materialist turn implies a "paradise" before the advent of materialism. One need not be a radical revisionist to question such Edenic visions. The terms of the discussion change, however, once we avoid equating narrative with historical fact (although historical facts are often communicated as narratives) but see them as interpretations of reality. Narratives are "ways of worldmaking," but also forms of sense-making and, above all, of national and cultural self-definition. Culture, in fact, is the realm in which they are told, compared, and revised. From the point of view of cultural and literary history, the question, then, is not primarily whether and when America turned materialist but why people thought it did and why they created this narrative at a particular historical moment.

The period in American cultural history in which the issue of materialism gained special prominence is that of the so-called Gilded Age, a derisory term coined by Mark Twain to draw attention to what he and many observers of the times considered not only a dramatic change of values but also a loss of genuine substance. If "golden" turns to "gilded," real value is replaced by fake value, substance gives way to pretension. Twain's term stuck, because it articulated the fears of many gentry-intellectuals and members of the middleclass that certain developments in American society were getting out of hand, threatening not only the political value system but also the influence and dominance of the self-appointed custodians of American civilization. To counter such developments, the charge of a turn toward materialism gained special currency – which means that the term materialism is of interest here not as a philosophical category but as a category of cultural conflict and

cultural criticism. The narrative of a turn to materialism is a symbolic strategy, designed to intervene in a cultural and political struggle by asserting a creeping perversion of values in which material values gradually gain priority over spiritual ones, until selfishness prevails and dominates the social fabric.

The polemical power of the concept becomes obvious in the political novels of the post-Civil War period which played an important role in creating the narrative of a materialist turn in America's society. These novels illustrate one essential aspect of this materialist turn: their criticism is voiced from the outside, from the position of, or in the name of, a counter-image of life which, in the case of the American gentry-intellectuals of the Gilded Age, was derived from the idea of civilization as the highest stage of human self-cultivation. Materialism on the other hand endangers this progress and, thus, the special promise of American civilization. This rhetorical (as well as polemical) construct can help to provide an important insight: To speak of materialism as a discursive construct does not mean to deny that there was a reality of materialism. It draws attention to the fact that there are different ways of representing this reality, because, in order to become meaningful, it has to be set in contrast to a counter-term which it is supposedly perverting. This turns the concept of materialism, like any other term of cultural criticism, into an inherently unstable, if not a protean category of analysis, which changes its meaning in relation to the oppositional terms through which it is defined.

Thus, the problem of materialism complicates itself where an outside perspective – and thereby the reliance on stable oppositions – is given up. This happens in the work of a group of writers who do not criticize materialism from an opposed (and oppositional) outside norm but from within. These critics acknowledge that the materialist impulse does not simply present a loss of principle or civilizatory balance; rather, they see it as something that is very much a part of the promise of American life and may even be part of the human make-up. As Dieter Schulz argues in his paper, the most interesting version of this view may be provided by Emerson, for whom signs of materialism are not negative per se, but basically signifiers of special energy. As such, they present a creative impulse that, unfortunately and tragically, always becomes reified. However, if one could manage to keep this creative impulse pure, it would follow its own tendency toward transcendence. The promise of materialism thus has to be preserved against the pressures of reification.

Mark Twain is the other prominent nineteenth-century American writer and critic who deals with the issue of materialism "from within." As Win-

fried Fluck shows, Twain understands materialism not as, by definition, a loss of principle but as an inherent part of our anthropological make-up. In some curiously amusing way, we are all Tom Sawyers, and materialism is only another means to use in our ongoing search for self-enhancement. This drive for self-improvement is not to be confused with mere selfishness. It is positive, because we would remain undeveloped otherwise. But it is also dangerous, because it leads to all kinds of self-deception. Twain's metaphor for that danger of self-deception is fiction, which is characterized by the same possibilities and dangers as the materialist impulse. However, Twain's cynical view leads him to a very perceptive emphasis on two recurring elements which materialism contributes to the search for (personal and social) identity: the roles of speculation and of credit as new and wonderfully effective forms of self-fashioning.

Although, in a way, Twain can be seen as a local colorist or regionalist writer, his loyalties to any particular region were not strong enough (in addition to the fact that his view of the "damned human race" was too harsh) to link his hopes for regeneration with any particular region. On the other hand, as several of the following papers argue, this has remained one of the most frequent and persistent strategies in American discussions of materialism. While the turn to materialist values threatens to pervert genuine values, a strong regional identity may provide one of the few effective counterforces. Such strategies of resistance are not only developed in regions which find themselves in the role of a backwater to industrial development and respond to such characterizations with proud revivals of their cultural traditions or soothing narratives of heroic defeat. As Dieter Meindl points out, such experiences may, on the contrary, complicate the role of region as a counterforce to materialism. But there is, at present – as demonstrated in the papers by Ludwig Deringer and Mark Busby – also a revival of regional identities under way in which the region emerges as one of the few remaining places of authentic experience in which certain values are still intact.

While, in the nineteenth century, the narrative of a materialist turn was countered by the idea of civilization, twentieth-century critics have increasingly resorted to the narrative of regional regeneration. However, as Miles Orvell argues, the elements of this narrative can very well be reappropriated by a new and advanced stage of American consumer culture – and can thus be used by the very system which they were supposed to oppose. Originally, the region was conceived as everything materialism is not. Nowadays, in the staged regionality of consumer culture, it often seems to become the training-ground for a regenerated, purified materialism.

In his paper Leo Marx in effect calls into question a premise of the foregoing analysis. To explain why people thought that America had turned materialist, he places much less emphasis on the supplanting of one narrative by another (as if the decisive changes occurred within the realm of story-telling) and much more on the transformation of what was generally regarded, after all, as the "material" basis of national life. We may be story-telling beings but, what seems more important here, we are also tool-making, nature-altering, goods- and wealth-producing beings. In late nineteenth-century discourse the word 'materialism' generally was used referentially, and the assumed referent was not obscure: it was an ethos whose increasingly strong hold on the collective consciousness was attributable to a specific set of changes in the material realm of society. Whether seen in a positive or negative light, the changes included the accelerating growth of urban industrialism, the emergence of a consumption-oriented economy, and the increasing domination of the republic by a monied corporate elite and its values. One other significant set of these changes consisted in the role, socio-economic organization, and inherent artefactual character of the mechanic or industrial arts. During the Gilded Age the far-reaching, ambiguous cultural import of the rapidly accelerating rate of innovation in these "low" arts was eloquently attested to by, for example, Walt Whitman in "Democratic Vistas" and Mark Twain in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, and – as Marx contends – by the emergence of a new but hazardous concept: technology.

each ten:
a) The workshop's focus on ambivalent "materialists" such as Emerson or Twain, the relation between materialism, technology and consumer culture, and the relation between materialism and manifestations of the new regionalism in American life inevitably caused some of the by now familiar chapters of the narrative of a materialist turn in American society to be left out: Franklin's cunning construction of a "virtuous" materialism and its survival in the popular literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; the attempts of American realists to "civilize" the energies of materialism which they saw, like Emerson, as manifestations of a special promise of American life; the melodramatic ambivalence with which American naturalism regarded materialism as a source of both self-empowerment and self-destruction, resurfacing in a "mannered" and mythic form in the work of F. Scott Fitzgerald; the restitution of a clear-cut dichotomy between materialism and common American values in the years of the Depression; and, finally, the return of a view of materialism as fundamentally inauthentic and as a betrayal of the "American Dream" after World War II. Today, in an age of expanding global markets, the narrative of a materialist turn is

experiencing a strong comeback, although it no longer seems to be a "specifically American" narrative. This makes it even more pressing to study this phenomenon in its American manifestations.



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