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The Seven Deadly Sins –
Human Knowledge for the Age of Crisis

English sample translation by Brian Poole

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Prologue

When a tsunami wave hit the coasts of Thailand and India on December 26, 2004, more than a quarter of a million people died. Tourists who were there to soak up the sun, locals going about their daily work, fathers, mothers, children, were all overwhelmed by the natural disaster. With one exception, for one small group was spared. Not a single victim was recorded among them, although they were caught in the eye of the storm. These were the inhabitants of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, a group of islands in the Bay of Bengal. They were people who lived in the simplest conditions and earned their living by fishing. What saved them?

Not sophisticated technology, but empirical knowledge based on the traditional experience of dealing with the forces of nature. The islanders knew that the gods of the sea get angry every ten or twenty generations. That they then lash out wildly, sending wind and waves rarely ever seen before. And they also knew what to do in such a situation: Pay attention to the early warning systems, follow the animals that had already retreated to the mountains three days before the tsunami, and urge each other to climb to the peaks and wait there until the wrath of the gods had subsided. That's exactly what the islanders did. At a time when everything still seemed fine, when the tourists were still basking in the sun on the Thai beaches. The islanders survived because they acted in time, in accordance with centuries of experience.[i]

Traditional knowledge can save lives. Currently – in the age of polycrises – this insight is ensuring that the working methods of science are changing. This applies not only to earthquake research, but also to climate research, to resilience research, and to all branches of futurology. For example, the effect of ice melt in the Arctic on global ecosystems is being studied in close cooperation with the

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Inuit. Measures to preserve the biodiversity of flora and fauna, for example in the Zambezi region, are based on the knowledge of indigenous cultures, and the indigenous medicinal plant knowledge of Asia is of great interest to the pharmaceutical industry. Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) is on the rise worldwide. The times when traditional knowledge was ridiculed are over.[ii]

At the same time, caution is advised against a blind run on lost wisdom and knowledge traditions of so-called primitive peoples, against false hopes, romantic glorification, and dangerous promises of salvation. In January 2023, I visited my youngest daughter Lotte in Vancouver, where she spent her "gap year" after graduating from high school. She accompanied me for a while in search of the traditional knowledge of the First Nations on the Pacific coast. First, we went to the Squamish Lil'wat Cultural Centre, then we took the ferry from Horseshoe Bay to Nanaimo on Vancouver Island, and from there to Alert Bay, far to the north, where, in the U'mista Cultural Centre, Vain Alfred, a representative of the Kwakwaka'wakw, explained to us the masks, dances, and rituals of his tribe, but also their rules, taboos, and prohibitions. I attended a Survivors Conference with people who had survived the notorious residential schools as children, and I had working interviews with colleagues at the University of British Columbia. It was probably the most exciting of my research trips so far, but at the same time the most sobering. Because, in all the conversations with the local people, one message was unmistakable: Traditional knowledge cannot simply be imitated. Indigenous knowledge is not an export good. "The fact that you learn to drum a bit, talk to the trees, and weave sweet grass will not impress climate change, species loss, mountains of garbage in the world's oceans, and so on. You have caused all these crises! Why don't you use your own knowledge resources?"[iii]

And where is the traditional knowledge of the West? I was not prepared for this question and was disappointed and disillusioned at the same time. Because, of

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course, it was justified, but not what I wanted to hear. Moreover, there was my daughter's rather provocative question: You know your way around the past. So what's the problem?

Spontaneously, we think of the wise old women, the female herbalists, perhaps Hildegard von Bingen, or the early Celtic Christians, the Siberian shamans, and so on. If you dig a little deeper, the question of the regulatory systems of traditional Western societies automatically arises. What rituals, what taboos, what prohibitions were there? What festivals determined their rhythm of life? What was sacred to them? What stories did they tell each other, and who was responsible for passing on these traditions to the next generation? Here, at last, the age-old customs come into play, most of which were associated with religion. More precisely, those knowledge systems that have been assigned to the realm of the magical-religious since the Age of Enlightenment and have been declared a private matter. People were happy to finally get rid of these old-fashioned rules. This was especially true of all the restrictions in the name of sin. Hadn't the church enslaved humanity for centuries, restricted individual freedoms, justified oppression and slavery, and condemned people to a dull sense of guilt? Deadly sins in particular have the stench of centuries – at best something for religious fanatics or psychopaths, such as the one Morgan Freeman and Brad Pitt have to hunt down in the 1995 psychological thriller "Se7en."

But there is much more to it. In my search for the traditional knowledge of the West, encouraged by the many questions, I will hazard an experiment in this book by putting the concept of mortal sins under the microscope, as it were, and analysing their individual components in order to understand the empirical knowledge the West handed down with them: the wisdom, measures, and rules for the preservation of the social and natural balance, and thus for the long-term survival of a society. For each of the seven deadly sins covers a basic condition of

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human existence: *Gula* (gluttony) is about nutrition, *avaritia* (greed) is about possessions, wealth, and justice, and *luxuria* (debauchery) is about consumption, about the relationship to the world, be it people, animals, nature, or consumer goods. *Acedia* (listlessness) concerns the human need for security, the problem of the fear of loss, and the status quo bias. *Invidia* (envy) negotiates the dark side of competition. *Ira* (*anger*) deals with the theme of aggression and violence, and *superbia* (pride, belief in one's own invulnerability) is about hierarchy, status, and especially the dangers of power.

Taken together, a surprisingly up-to-date picture of the human dispositions emerges – the starting point of a doctrine that does not aim at discipline and suppression, but at balance, resonance, and reconciliation. It is less about the individual happiness and well-being that today's self-help literature wants us to achieve. Rather, it is about people in their environment, as social beings and as part of nature. The traditional knowledge stored in the doctrine of mortal sin shows us how to counteract our destructive forces and develop our positive world-changing potential. It provides us with a new horizon of interpretation and, I hope, a new way of thinking as we deal with the great challenges of our time.

3. *Luxuria* & consumerism

Sergius Orata was the star architect of the late Roman Republic, and his trademark was luxury, luxury, luxury. To this day, the ingenious heating system he invented, the hypocaust, is best known: Hot air, led through cavities under stone floors and pipes in walls, creates a pleasant room temperature, and this principle of underfloor heating made life much more pleasant for the Romans since the 1st century BC. The hypocaust system was also a quantum leap in comfort for their contemporary wellness business. The water basins (*balnea pensilia*), which were built

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above an underground heat chamber, held the heat for hours, so that the bathing party could linger, enjoy themselves, and relax without annoying slaves constantly adding hot water. The slaves sweated elsewhere, continuously firing the oven outside, from which the heat was conducted into the heating chamber under the floor. Orata's underfloor-heated buildings became the epitome of luxurious splendour. Only the most expensive building materials – such as cippolino, a valuable marble from the Greek town of Karystos – were good enough for the columns; only gold-embroidered cloth from Egypt met his requirements for the wallpaper of his magnificent villas.

And then there were the oysters. Orata was not only a brilliant architect and inventor, but also an extremely business-minded entrepreneur. After recognizing early on that the demand for oysters and pearls was swiftly increasing, he built artificially heated basins in Lake Lucrinus in Campania, in which the water could be kept at an optimal temperature for oysters. These oyster fields, which are still considered a milestone in the history of oyster farming, developed into an extremely lucrative business model.[iv]

Enjoying long baths and eating oysters in peace and quiet are pure luxuries available only to the rich and beautiful. And not everyone finds luxury appealing. For the Roman writer Valerius Maximus, from whom we know all this, the sweet poison of *luxuria* – he spoke of "overindulgence and voluptuousness" – was one of the greatest dangers of all. In his point of view, sooner or later it led to misery. And he painted this misery in garish colours: Just remember how the children who have grown up in luxury squander their fathers' inheritance. Luxury yields feelings of self-pity and dissatisfaction, as you can see, says Valerius, in the women who have to buy new things every day because what they already have is never enough for them. Or think of the men who, in a battle to outdo each other, enumerate the size of their houses and properties. Moreover, luxury creates massive inequality

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and promotes corruption. Bribed judges pronounce agreeable sentences in return for money or the supply of young boys. And then there is the problem of effeminacy. Even the famous Hannibal – the greatest of generals, who led an entire army, elephants and all, across the Alps and brought the Romans one defeat after another – even this seasoned warrior was not immune to the poison of *luxuria*. For no sooner had he pitched his camp at Capua after his greatest victory at Cannae than he fell into the debauchery of the Campanians, their sumptuous meals, the delicious wines, the scent of ointments, and their beautiful women. And it was all downhill from there. Lulled into "sleep and enjoyment," he allowed himself be defeated.[v]

Of course, Valerius lived in the early imperial period about a century after Sergius Orata; moreover, by profession, he wrote textbooks in rhetoric. He was not a historian; rather, he collected useful arguments – what we would call anecdotal evidence today, which could prove useful to a lawyer in court, for example. Whether the stories were true or false did not matter. What is certain, however, is that "Orata," "Campania," and "Oysters" were used almost proverbially in the time of Emperor Tiberius when it came to castigating luxury and excessive consumption.

Debauchery, voluptuousness, "drunken thirst": What exactly is *luxuria*?

But what exactly is *luxuria*?[vi] Etymologically, i.e., according to the original meaning of the word, the Latin adjective "*luxus*" is derived from "laterally bent, dislocated, oblique." The noun "*luxuria*" connotes opulence, wasteful expenditure, an exorbitant lifestyle, uninhibited consumption, gluttony, and debauchery. Meanings of the adjective and the noun are both related to each other insofar as they concern

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deviations from the degree recognized as normal, i.e., from the straight, the healthy, and from the morally good. Since Plato, the term has encompassed everything that goes beyond the satisfaction of "natural" needs. These include disproportionate expenditures on clothing, jewellery, travel, food, and living, as well as unbridled sexuality, especially in contact with catamites and prostitutes, and indulgence in amusements such as comedies, feasts, or pleasure trips. Excessive splendour in the building industry also falls under luxury, along with the exaggerated staging of ostentation and pomp on carriages, in triumphal processions, or marches, and finally licentiousness in the exercise of power or the use of force by rulers. There are also harmful luxuries in art: for example, an excess of verse forms, metres, or verbiage in poetry, which impairs the beauty of the style. Although the pejorative use of the term predominates, there is also a positive *luxuria*: for example, public splendour and glory, as long as it corresponds to the rank of the ruler, or the abundance of nature, its opulence, superfluity, and fertility.

The church father Augustine traces the problem back to paradise. Excessive indulgence, lack of restraint, and too much desire heralded the beginning of the end. In paradise, as is well known, everyone was perfectly happy. Adam and Eve lived in a state of complete needlessness, for they lacked nothing. Yet they were overcome by the desire for more, and thus the world of abundance was no longer perfect. It was not the good Lord or the Archangel Michael who expelled them from paradise; it was the humans who destroyed it. They longed for the fruit, but not because they were hungry. On the contrary, they were full. The cause of their fall was the human "surplus of desire."

According to Augustine, after the expulsion from paradise, this surplus was to spread like a plague. Since then, it has remained innate in each and every one of Adam's sons and daughters, and it has been passed on from one generation to the next. The so-called original sin is the inherent desire of man for more and more,

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regardless of how much he already has and what exactly he covets. The desire for things and the desires of the flesh spring from one and the same source.[vii] The effects are also the same: *Luxuria* – no matter what form it takes – weakens and contaminates body and soul, causes all kinds of ailments, and ages one prematurely. It spoils one's good reputation, one's wealth, eyesight, and voice. It defiles people, extinguishes them, kills, spoils, robs, and dulls.[viii]

"*Wollust*" – a common German translation of *luxuria* – is actually misleading. Formed from the terms "well" and "desire," the Middle-High German word was used in the sense of "satisfaction" or "pleasure" – yet both in a positive sense. It was also used in religious texts of the Middle Ages, where there was a holy "lust" for devotion. The negative connotation and the restriction to the sexual sphere were added later and spread very unevenly from region to region.[ix] The Latin term *luxuria,* on the other hand, was increasingly narrowed down to sexual debauchery in the course of the Middle Ages. For example, the sermon manual *Fasciculus Morum* from the 14th century defines *luxuria* as a form of physical incontinence: a desire for sex beyond moderation and reason, a "drunken thirst" (sitis ebria), a "momentary outburst" or an "eternal bitterness" that "shuns the light, seeks darkness, and entirely plunders man's mind."[x]

In any case, the problem lies in the targeted increase in the desire for more and more. Today we speak of a consumer relationship to the world around us and of the constant encouragement to consume, whether it be clothes, resources, sexual partners, or oysters. And as with all other mortal sins, the same applies here: As soon as the appetite is satisfied, the object of desire becomes uninteresting and hardly worthy of note, just as one throws away a lemon when the juice has been squeezed out (Kant).[xi] How the narrowing of luxury to sexual desire came about is another story. Here we concentrate on the overall problem: excessive consumption, no matter in which area.

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Cleopatra serves red mullet fillet, Seneca pities the catamites, and Veblen invents conspicuous consumption

Now to the risk groups. The rich have always been considered particularly susceptible to vice, and thus *luxuria* is part of the standard criticism of the elite. The classic example is the legendarily dissolute and decadent Roman way of life, or perhaps better, the equally dissolute criticism of contemporaries – since most of what we know about it comes from inflammatory writings against "those at the top."

At the time, many felt called upon to make such criticism. For example, the naturalist and philosopher Pliny the Elder, author of the thirty-seven-volume *Naturalis historia*, an encyclopaedia that remained relevant for centuries. He passionately criticizes luxury architecture. Outraged yet simultaneously fascinated, Pliny describes the gold-adorned palaces of the emperors Gaius and Nero, and he wonders how this is possible when the fields of the peasants who feed the Roman capital are similar in size to the emperor's throne rooms. A not entirely unimportant detail: Pliny was prefect of the Roman fleet in Misenum near Pompeii, so he belonged to the elite. He probably owned many of the luxury goods he criticized, and some were dug up, well preserved, under the ashes of Vesuvius. Unfortunately, Pliny, despite all his erudition, considered volcanism to be a figment of the imagination. In fact, he did not devote a single section of his natural history to this natural phenomenon. When Mount Vesuvius erupted in October, 79 AD, he died in a rain of ashes, likely while trying to get a ship out to sea in order to follow his scientific sense of duty and investigate the cloud of smoke more closely.

Pliny's contemporary, Lucan, was a historian who specialized in the period from the Roman civil war up to the establishment of the Principate under

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Augustus, Caesar's stepson, in 27 BC. In his *Pharsalia* he describes the dissolute feasts of the Egyptian queen Cleopatra with palpable fascination. How did she manage to turn Caesar's head and make him her ally, even after he had vanquished her and defeated the rebels in Alexandria? The decisive moment was provided by Cleopatra's invitation to a night of *luxuria* at a colossal feast. Even the dining room resembled a temple – the epitome of corruption – with coffered ceilings, gilt beams, and marble walls, as well as agate, porphyry, and onyx: not as jewellery, but in massive columns. There were ebony doorposts, ivory covered the foyer halls, and the doors themselves were inlaid with Indian tortoiseshell and decorated with emeralds. Gemstones glittered on the couches; a different light illuminated every room. And there were many slaves – an entire "nation of waiters" to serve them. Some wore Libyan hairstyles, others had dyed-blond hair – Caesar had not seen so many blond locks in the entire Germanic Rhine Valley – and some had curls, their hair artfully pulled back from their foreheads.

In this hall, the ruling couple now reclined to their dinner. Cleopatra had dressed up her ominous beauty lavishly: Her necklace alone was worth a fortune, and she was almost crushed by the weight of her ornaments. Round plates made of the most valuable wood from the Atlas Mountains were set out on snow-white ivory feet. Gathered from all over the world, the delicacies from the air, land, and sea were then served in golden bowls. Cleopatra even had animals served that were worshipped as gods in Egypt – sacrilege! – and Nile water in crystal jugs. Wine – not the local Meroe, but the Roman Falernian wine – was dispensed in goblets made of precious stone. In addition, wreaths of spikenard flowers and roses were braided, the hair was moistened with cinnamon oil, which fully developed its fragrance, and herbal infusions of the freshly imported Amomum, a ginger plant, served as regular refreshment. Caesar, who was unfamiliar with such luxury,

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learned to squander the riches of a plundered world – and he was dazzled by Cleopatra.[xii]

For other authors, too, debauchery was very much a sign of the times. Livy attributed the moral decay of the Roman elite to foreign influences from the East. The "nouveau riche" attracted the general suspicion of luxury.[xiii] Horace calls extravagance a mental illness (morbus mentis). Together with false ambition, greed for money, and sinister superstition, he places *luxuria* among those torments of the soul that make a fool of man.[xiv]

A special manifestation of this mental illness is the so-called conspicuous consumption. Seneca provides an example. He tells the story of how two wealthy Romans once outbid each other in public when purchasing an oversized red mullet, purportedly from the kitchen of Emperor Tiberius. The fish finally went over the counter for five thousand sesterces. An astronomical price! A chicken cost about two sesterces, a whole pig around twenty sesterces. And the buyer did not pay for the completely overpriced fish because he was hungry, nor because the fish tasted particularly delicious; on the contrary, it was already a bit stale and certainly no longer fresh. No, the buyer demonstrated with the purchase that he could afford it. He wanted to impress others, to publicly demonstrate his affiliation to the elite. The need that was satisfied here was the need for recognition.[xv]

This urge lies at the root of the concept of "conspicuous consumption," which the sociologist Thorstein Veblen coined in his *Theory of the Leisure Class*, originally published in 1899. There is also talk of "demonstrative" consumption or "prestige" consumption. With his theory, Veblen made visible the phenomenon that people are apparently willing to spend money on things whose actual purpose can also be fulfilled by significantly cheaper products. The benefit lies less in the satisfaction of material needs than in their symbolic value. More specifically, there is a form of luxury consumption whose purpose is to enjoy public recognition. The

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demonstration of wealth serves to stabilize one's own status in society. This principle is widespread across cultures. What is crucial is that wasteful consumption – whether it is the consumption of goods, services, or human lives – meets the following condition: The expenditure itself must be completely superfluous. Only waste brings prestige! The art historian Glenn Adamson called Veblen's theory of conspicuous consumption a kind of basic law in the history of luxury, comparable to the law of gravity in physics.[xvi]

In the past, there was less tinsel …

Other risk groups for *luxuria* are – according to ancient authors – the urbanites and youths. Rural frugality and simplicity, prudence and justice, remain tried and tested antidotes that stand in sharp contrast to the luxurious life of the city. Indeed, country life, not yet spoiled by luxury, is considered a shining antithesis to the decadent metropolis. Caesar praised the Nervii, a warlike tribe of Gaul resolutely opposed to Roman subjugation, for their uncorrupted morals, in which he saw the source of their resilience. Whereas the rough, simple way of life of their ancestors ensured that they remained healthy, the refined urban lifestyle of the Romans led to their decline.[xvii]

The same applies to the youth in general. Their tendency to waste – especially to deviate from the "good morals" of their ancestors – has been complained about since time immemorial. Aristotle sees the greatest danger in the fierce desire of youth. Above all, the physical yearning for sensual pleasure results in a lack of self-control. In the 1st century AD, Plutarch accused young people of knowing only wastefulness, of passionately indulging in dance, of misusing their fathers' money, and of indulging in dice, binge-drinking, and lovemaking with young girls or married women.[xviii] Sallust, like other Latin authors, criticizes the youth for being

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so impetuous. Instead of waiting for the healthy development of needs, youths prefer to arouse artificial needs by exposing themselves to increased sensory stimuli. Moreover, the consequences of their immoral behaviour, their unrestrained acquisitiveness, and their unbridled expenditures demonstrate that this process cannot end well. Carousing and basking in the prosperity the parents had earned through hard work not only leads to individual decay, but also to the destruction of wealth and prosperity.[xix]

Basically, all these accusations are directed not only at the youth, but also at contemporaries in general. Just as the accusation of *luxuria* is a standard part of the criticism of the elite, it also gives voice to the collective discontent with the present. Yet, when compared to an imagined past, almost every present doesn't stand a chance. "In the past," in contrast to "today," everything was always somehow simpler – perhaps a little more primitive, but less complicated. A handshake still counted. You still had to work hard. It was exhausting, but good for body and soul. People were toughened by the effort of honest work. People ate because they were hungry. And not, as is the case today, to stimulate ever more appetite.

Seneca likewise invested the luxurious debauchery in the 1st century AD. He was the most prominent representative of the Roman Stoa, the mentor and tutor of the notorious Emperor Nero – more about him in the chapter on *superbia* – and thus probably the most frustrated pedagogue of all time. After he had withdrawn from the court at Rome in old age, at his estate he wrote numerous, endlessly long letters about the good life and – more entertainingly – about the opposite, namely: the bad, decadent life of the Romans. He turned his attention, above all, to feasts where everyone stuffs themselves with oysters, clams, sea urchins, mullet fillets, the participants vomiting in between courses so that they can continue eating afterwards. To his reader, Seneca promises to "reframe from describing the troops

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of wretched boys who are going to be sexually abused after the meals are over" – boys, for whom unspeakable shame awaits in the bedroom – but then he proceeds to do so, noting the "regiments of catamites, ranked by their race and colour but all with the same smooth skin, the same amount of down on their faces, the same hairstyle to ensure that straight hair is mingled with their curls."[xx]

For Seneca, the consequences are obvious. Too much food, too much drinking, too much sex leads to an accumulation of every possible malady in the body. People suffer from stomach dilation, ambling about, pale and sickly, plagued by a loss of equilibrium, a hardening of the liver, tinnitus, migraines, and cancer – the punishments for hedonism, the natural consequences of luxury, all typical diseases of civilization. The treatment costs are the premium that must be paid for such excesses.

And it's not only the humans who have to suffer; the consequences of urban decadence for nature are just as bad. Seneca refers to such extravagance as a "ransacking" of "land and sea."[xxi] In the long run, the Romans' unusual cravings lead to the plundering of fields and oceans. And thus Seneca never tires of praising the simple life as a remedy. Similar to the "good old days," country life serves as a projection screen for supposedly idyllic simplicity. Here, it is assumed, people are content with what they have; they live in harmony with nature and know neither greed nor crime. They rest at the murmuring spring, dine on what nature herself dispenses, and enjoy the salubrious sleep of the just.

The hymn in praise of the simple country life is a so-called *topos*, a commonplace as old as luxury. It is the eternal sigh of all those who suffer from civilizational fatigue and the stress of everyday life, of those who long for a paradise, a Golden Age before the world came apart at the seams. It is interesting that this world – purportedly without luxury, without desire, and without need –

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was to be located in the countryside, of all places, where the constant alternation between abundance and scarcity is rather a natural part of everyday life.

For Seneca, any deviation from the golden mean was tantamount to a life contrary to nature. Indeed, he went even further: Animals know no luxury, and thus luxury is a crime against nature. Conversely, the lack of luxury is a sign of a happy, quasi-divine primordial condition that has unfortunately been corrupted by civilization and progress. Not very original, yet timeless – from Hesiod and Plato to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Karl Marx, and William Morris or Henry David Thoreau, this *topos* has been successfully marketed again and again.[xxii]

Saint John of Capistrano gives tips for the coiffing of long-haired Viennese men, and Werner Sombart invents luxury females

On the question of gender bias: Are women particularly susceptible to the temptations of *luxuria*?

After the Battle of Cannae in Calabria in 216 BC, in which Hannibal had inflicted his greatest defeat on the Roman army, the plebeian tribune C. Oppius issued a strict law to curb women's luxury, which had gone rampant, threatening to ruin the state. At least according to Livy's reports – almost two hundred years after the event transpired.

In fact, women receive disproportionately more attention than men in the legislation against excessive luxury. Although there is no lack of prominent dissenting voices. Seneca, otherwise not known as a feminist sympathiser, sees no signs that women are more at risk. After all, men show the same pursuit of expensive things such as clothes, jewellery, and cosmetics, and they compete in

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beauty pageants.[xxiii] And of all people, Tertullian (160 to 220 AD) – the most humourless of all the Church Fathers and author of a treatise on female finery – defends women. He contrasts their dignity and chaste behaviour with male lust for pleasure; in men, vanity, like a defect of nature, is innate. Tertullian makes fun of peculiar tricks that men perform to optimize their bodies, such as thinning their beards, trimming them all around, parting their hair, dyeing it to conceal the grey, continuously removing the fine hair all over the body, smoothing their coiffure with pomade, softening their skin by rubbing it with rough powder (peeling), and questioning the mirror at every opportunity and looking anxiously into it.[xxiv]

More than a thousand years later, Saint John of Capistrano, a popular Italian itinerant preacher from Abruzzo, berated men in a similar way. In 1451, he stopped off in Vienna during a preaching tour through Europe; here, he criticized the men for wearing their hair so long and for loving it more than their souls. Capistrano tallies up just how much the Viennese squander on their elaborate coiffures over time, which required wine, mercury, and various spices every day. "You are proud of your hair. To what purpose? You rob your wives daily of a dozen eggs to bathe your hair. How many chickens are thus lost! Enough in the end to buy a horse."[xxv]

For the early ancient period in Greece, the classical historian Melanie Meaker was able to show that luxury expenses such as golden jewellery, hair clips, body care, perfume, scented oils, long hairstyles, and even flower wreaths and garlands were also typical for men. And it was precisely the men who were considered particularly susceptible to luxury in this era; after all, women were excluded from participating in symposia or political gatherings and therefore had much less opportunity to publicly show themselves dressed up. Only a small proportion of

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the contemporary source material is explicitly directed against the luxury of women.[xxvi]

The invention of the luxury female came later. Whereas medieval preachers left no doubt about men's penchant for *luxuria*, 20th century academics determined that women were the source of all evil – the origin of capitalism. At least that's how the economist and cultural sociologist Werner Sombart saw it when, in 1913, he explained the birth of capitalism out of the spirit of luxury. At this singular time in history, he assigned the decisive role to women – to what he called "luxury girls." Especially the mistresses of the *ancien régime*, such as at the court of the French kings in Versailles, were a thorn in his side. Their lovers, according to Sombart, had to finance the luxurious lifestyle of these ladies in a competitive struggle to keep them happy with ever more elaborate gifts. This gave them the incentive to continue increasing their wealth and, with it, the country's gross national product. Inadvertently, their mistresses ensured the emergence of capitalism in the 18th century in this way.[xxvii]

From luxury to obscene waste

Even though Sombart's theory was not given much further attention in research due to a lack of evidence, it still fuels the collective imagination today. And, of course, there is also a grain of truth in it: The desire for luxury motivates human ingenuity, thus advancing civilization. This is also demonstrated in our first example of the architect Orata. The invention of underfloor heating and oyster farming creates demand, increases consumption, and ensures an economic upswing. Luxury is indispensable for a healthy economy, and everyone ultimately benefits from it.

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There remains a disagreement in research about the beginnings of the modern consumer society. Was it born in 18th century Britain? Or in the Netherlands of the 17th century? Or already in the 15th century during the Italian Renaissance, when the production of luxury goods expanded massively?[xxviii] The London-based historian Frank Trentmann deals with this question in detail in his *Empire of Things*, a history of consumption. Material desires, he notes, are not a modern invention. But consumer needs can be cultivated and reinforced or neglected and silenced. According to Trentmann, the last five hundred years have been a time of sustained reinforcement.[xxix]

But the mass consumption stimulated by Western industrialized nations in the last fifty years surpasses everything previously seen. New technologies and production methods have enabled quantum leaps in waste. With online retail, new cultural techniques of shopping have emerged, generating new cycles of ever faster consumption. We buy clothes every week and dispose of them just as quickly; we completely restyle our homes every few years and go on vacation in Kaua'i or Vanuatu. Increased consumption is the secret to the success of economic growth. Most of us are now dimly aware that not only people, but the planet itself is in peril. The age of obscene waste has pushed Earth to its limits.

What did the world look like in societies that tended to neglect material desires or even to deliberately throttle them? In the second part of this chapter, three examples from different eras and cultures follow: first, the sumptuary laws; second, the architectures of simplicity; and third, the practice of "giving away instead of consuming."

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[i] Cf. “Knowledge of Natural World Saved Primitive Tribes of Andaman and Nicobar Islands from Tsunami,” in: *The Hindu* (New Delhi), 5 January 2005; C. Thrush, R.S. Ludwin, “Finding Fault: Indigenous Seismology, Colonial Science, and the Rediscovery of Earthquakes and Tsunamis in Cascadia,” in: *American Indian Culture & Research Journal*, Vol. 31, Nr. 4 (Fall/Winter 2007), pp. 1–24.
[ii] Cf. “The White House Indigenous Knowledge Guidance,” 1 December 2022, https://www.whitehouse.gov/ostp/news-updates/2022/06/27/readout-ostp-and-ceq-initial-engagement-on-white-house-indigenous-knowledge-effort/. Other examples can be found in the success of books such as Robin Wall Kimmerer’s *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants* (London 2020), which highlights the traditional knowledge of the Potawatomi around Lake Michigan, or of Tyson Yunkaporta’s *Sand Talk: How Indigenous Thinking Can Save the World* (New York 2020).
[iii] See Michael F. Brown, *Who Owns Native Culture?* (Cambridge MA 2003), pp. 205–208. On the violent appropriation of indigenous knowledge, see Roy Ellen, Peter Parkes, Alan Bicker (eds.), *Indigenous Environmental Knowledge and Its Transformations: Critical Anthropological Perspectives* (London 2000).
[iv] Valerius Maximus, *Memorable Doings and Sayings*, edited and translated by D. R. Shackleton Bailey, (Cambridge, MA 2000), Vol. 2, Book 9, pp. 292ff. On the oysters, see Annalisa Marzano, *Harvesting the Sea: The Exploitation of Marine Resources in the Roman Mediterranean* (Oxford 2013), Chapter 6 (“Oysters and Other Shell Fish”), pp. 173–197; the author indicates that Orata’s oyster farming in Lake Lucrinus was likely feasible without a hypocaust due to the naturally warm water temperatures (p. 184).
[v] Valerius Maximus, *Memorable Doings and Sayings*, Vol. 2, Book 9, p. 303.
[vi] See Dorit Grugel-Pannier, *Luxus: Eine begriffs- und ideengeschichtliche Untersuchung unter besonderer Berücksichtigung von Bernard Mandeville* (Frankfurt 1996), pp. 17–38. The Greek language has no direct equivalent for *luxuria*. The Greek term *habrosynē* best describes the range of meanings, but originally referred to a very specific extravagant lifestyle associated with the East, and with the Lydians in particular. On the concept of luxury since Plato, see Christopher J. Berry, *The Idea of Luxury: A conceptual and historical investigation* (Cambridge 1994), pp. 45–100.
[vii] Augustine, *City of God*, translated by Marcus Dods (New York 2000), Book 14, chap. 10: “Whether it is to be believed that our first parents in Paradise, before they sinned, were free from all perturbation”). Cf. Frank Trentmann, *Empire of Things: How We Became a World of Consumers, from the Fifteenth Century to the Twenty-first* (New York 2016), p. 6; Giorgio Riello and Peter McNeill, *Luxury: A rich history* (Oxford 2016), p. 4f. Riello and McNeil emphasize that luxury is always about the extraordinary, about what goes beyond the affordable and the everyday. On the one hand, luxury is both spiritually and materially uplifting; on the other hand, it is seen as “unproductive” and therefore useless. Luxury is not the reason, but often the consequence of social injustice.
[viii] Anon., *Fasciculus Morum: A Fourteenth-Century Preacher’s Handbook*, edited and translated by Siegfried Wenzel (University Park and London 1989) pp. 700f.
[ix] Friedrich Kluge, “Wollust” in: Kluge, *Etymologisches Wörterbuch der Deutschen Sprache* (Berlin 2012).
[x] *Fasciculus Morum*, p. 648f.
[xi] Immanuel Kant, *Kant’s Gesammelte Schriften*, Band XXVII, Vierte Abteilung (Vorlesungen), Vierter Band, Erste Hälfte, *Vorlesungen über Moralphilosophie* (Berlin 1974), p. 384.
[xii] Lucan, *Pharsalia* (Civil War), translated by Jane Wilson Joyce (Ithaca 1993), pp. 273–275.
[xiii] Cf. Elke Hartmann, *Ordnung in Unordnung: Kommunikation, Konsum und Konkurrenz in der stadtrömischen Gesellschaft der frühen Kaiserzeit* (Stuttgart 2016), pp. 146–183.
[xiv] Grugel-Pannier, Luxus, p. 21, 28, 29. For Horace, see Sidney Alexander, *The Complete Odes & Satires of Horace* (Princeton 1999), Satire 2.3, p. 264; and see also Horace’s wonderful satirical praise of the simple life in Satire 2.2 (pp. 252–259).
[xv] Seneca: *Letters on Ethics*, translated by Margaret Graver and A. A. Long (Chicago 2015), Letter 95.42, p. 375. More on Seneca below.
[xvi] Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (Oxford 2007). See also Riello and McNeill, *Luxury*, p. 5; Berry, *The Idea of Luxury*, pp. 30ff.; Christian von Scheve, “Hauptsache teuer! Thorstein Veblen: Der demonstrative Konsum,” in: Sighard Neckel et al. (eds.), *Sternstunden der Soziologie: Wegweisende Theoriemodelle des soziologischen Denkens* (Frankfurt 2010), pp. 423–447, here p. 444. In regard to the USA, see Elizabeth Currid-Halkett, *The Sum of Small Things* (Princeton 2017).

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[xvii] Grugel-Pannier, Luxus, p. 29; Julius Caesar, *The Gallic War*, translated and with an introduction by Carolyn Hammond, (Oxford 1996), Book 2, 15.4. This section of Caesar's history deals with the subjugation of the Nervii, a tribe on the northern bank of the Sambre whose capital was Bavay: "When Caesar inquired about their character and customs he discovered the following: they permitted no merchants within their borders; they did not allow the import of wine and other luxury goods, because they believed such things enfeebled their spirit and weakened their courage. They were fierce men, and very brave, who reproached and condemned all the other Belgae for surrendering to the Roman people and casting aside their ancestral courage: they declared that they would send no envoys, and accept no peace terms" (Julius Caesar, *The Gallic War*, Book 2.15).
[xviii] See Grugel-Pannier, Luxus, p. 19f.
[xix] Ibid., p. 20.
[xx] Seneca, *Letters on Ethics*, 95.24, p. 371.
[xxi] Seneca, *Letters on Ethics*, 95.19, p. 370.
[xxii] See Frank Trentmann, "Civilization and its Discontents: English Neo-Romanticism and the Transformation of Anti-Modernism in Twentieth-century Western Culture," in: *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 29, Issue 4 (1994), pp. 583–625.
[xxiii] Grugel-Pannier, Luxus, p. 31; Seneca, *Natural Questions*, Book 7, 31.1–3, translated by Harry Hine (Chicago 2010), pp. 134–135: "Vice is still in progress. Luxury discovers something new to go crazy over, sexual immorality discovers a new indignity to inflict on itself, the moral collapse and corruption that stem from self-indulgence discover something more voluptuous, more sensuous, to die for. We have not yet got rid of every trace of soundness; we are still stamping out any remains of good character. With our sleek, glossy bodies, we have overtaken female beauty treatments; we men wear prostitutes' colours that married women would not put on; we tiptoe along with delicate, mincing steps (we do not walk but parade); we adorn our fingers with rings; a jewel is arranged on every joint. Daily we devise ways of damaging our masculinity."
[xxiv] Grugel-Pannier, Luxus, p. 32; Tertullian, *De cultu feminarum* (*The Apparel of Women*), Book 2, Chapter 8, English translation in: *The Fathers of the Church*, Volume 40, *Tertullian: Disciplinary, Moral and Aesthetical Works*, New York, 1959, pp. 139–140: "Now, since, by a defect of nature, there is inborn in men because of women (just as in women because of men) the desire to please, the male sex also has its own peculiar trickeries for enhancing their appearance: for instance, cutting the beard a bit too sharply, trimming it too neatly, shaving around the mouth, arranging and dyeing our hair, darkening the first signs of grey hair, disguising the down on the whole body with some female ointments, smoothing off the rest of the body by means of some gritty powder, then always taking occasion to look in a mirror, gazing anxiously into it."
[xxv] Cited in John Hofer, *St. John Capistran, Reformer*, trans. from the German by Rev. Patrick Cummins (London 1943), p. 189.
[xxvi] Melanie Meaker, "Von Blumenkränzen, Salbölen und Purpurgewändern: Luxus und Geschlechterrollen im archaischen Griechenland," in: Elisabetta Lupi, Jonathan Voges (eds.), *Luxus: Perspektiven von der Antike bis zur Neuzeit* (Stuttgart 2022), pp. 51–79, here p. 65–66 for the exclusion of women from public luxury consumption.
[xxvii] Werner Sombart, *Luxury and Capitalism* (Ann Arbor 1967; German original 1913).
[xxviii] Catherine Kovesi, *Luxury and the ethics of greed in Early Modern Italy* (Turnhout 2018), p. XVII, with reference to Neil McKendrick, John Brewer, John H. Plumb (eds.), *The Birth of Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England* (Bloomington 1982); Richard A. Goldthwaite, "The Empire of Things: Consumer Demand in Renaissance Italy," in: Francis W. Dent, Patricia Simons (eds.), *Patronage, Art and Society in Renaissance Italy* (Oxford 1987), pp. 153–175; Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of Modern World Economy* (Princeton 2000); Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age* (Berkeley 1988); Evelyn S. Welch, *Shopping in the Renaissance: Consumer Cultures in Italy, 1400-1600* (New Haven 2005); Peter Stearns, *Consumerism in World History: The Global Transformation of Desire* (London 2001).
[xxix] Trentmann, *Empire of Things*, p. 7.

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