



# A NATION OF OVER-SPENDERS, IT'S TIME WE CHANGED OUR VALUES AND BEHAVIOUR

By Professor Oliver James

**Since 1979, we have become a nation of 'it could be you', 'shop till you drop', credit-fuelled, consumer junkies. This has led to a disastrous doubling in mental illness – depression, anxiety, substance abuse and personality disorders. Our changed values have literally been driving us mad, causing self-destructive and damaging behaviour, whether that be excessive debts, violence or workaholia.**

In numerous studies in 14 different nations, people who place too high a value on money, possessions, appearances (physical and keeping up with the Joneses status anxiety) and fame have been shown to be more likely to suffer depression, neurosis and substance abuse. Forced by structural changes in the economy, like greater job insecurity and declining real

income, and by the new “greed is good” entrepreneurial culture, we became much more materialistic, and consequently much more emotionally distressed.

Three recent studies of nationwide samples of Britons show that one quarter of us suffer mental illnesses. This is double the average for mainland Western European nations, suggesting that there is something about our political economy which is making us ill.

The enormity of the change in both values and behaviour that resulted from Margaret Thatcher- and Blatcher-ism (Blair's New Labour era) are best expressed by the growth in personal debt. Only when you understand this can you grasp the scale of change since the credit crunch that has been required and is already happening among consumers.

In 1980, household debts were £200 billion, mostly composed of house mortgages. By the time Thatcher was deposed, in 1990, this had more than doubled, to over £500 billion. It stayed at that level until the arrival of Tony Blair. Aided and abetted by an astonishingly imprudent Chancellor Gordon Brown, it nearly trebled from this high base, between 1997 and 2008, reaching £1,400 billion.

The greater availability of easy, often unsecured credit was represented by politicians and retailers alike as a liberation, even as a form of upward social mobility. The poor could now afford to buy their own homes. Alas, this was mostly nonsense. Today, by far the largest group to be in arrears with their mortgages, or seeking bankruptcy or IVAs, are people who purchased their council houses.



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This is particularly harmful to well-being. In general, people with the lowest incomes are twice as likely as those from the top social classes to be mentally ill. But a recent study showed that low income does not in itself make us ill: the level of debt of poor people is critical. For example, a person with six separate debts or more is six times more likely to be mentally ill than a person with none. One quarter of people with mental illnesses are in debt, compared with only 8% of those with none.

By contrast, mainland Western Europeans continued to rent rather than buy their homes, and continued to both save money and to have much lower levels of debt. In themselves, these facts reduced their materialism and contributed to their being half as mentally ill as us.

If easy credit was the vehicle by which Thatcherism and Blatcher-ism conveyed us to a demented materialism, marketing and advertising were the map for this joyless journey. This also helps to explain our high rate of mental illness. For several decades, America has spent four times more per capita on advertising to its population than mainland Western European nations. Britain and the other English-Speaking nations (Canada, Australia, New Zealand) have spent twice as much.

Advertisers have long made no secret of the fact that their main goal is to encourage consumers to be dissatisfied not only with their possessions, but with their appearances and very selves. They also work hard to misrepresent commodities as needs, rather than unnecessary wants. In doing so, they are key drivers of materialism but also, directly, cause mental illnesses like depression.

For example, dozens of studies have demonstrated that exposure to exceptionally attractive models makes women dissatisfied with their appearance and makes men dissatisfied with their partners. The steady encroachment of advertising into so much of the world of children, via television and even school equipment stamped

with brand logos, has also added to the problem.

Given all this, in terms of our mental health, there are strong grounds for welcoming the Credit Crunch. Recent evidence reveals that there has been a sharp decrease in borrowing and increase in saving, reflecting changing values. Whilst growing unemployment and rising indebtedness will certainly cause higher mental illness for some of the population, the majority have clearly demonstrated a greatly reduced emphasis on materialism since 2009. Credit card debt has particularly declined. In opinion polls, there has been a sharp rise in the proportion of people who strongly agree with statements like “generally I would rather save up for something than buy it on credit”.

Taking a wider and longer view, I believe there are strong grounds for predicting a massive shift in our attitude to consumption. There is a growing realisation that money does not just not make you happy, placing too high a value on it actually makes you prone to mental illness. But perhaps the key trigger for a revolution in values will be climate change.

Hardly any serious scientists doubt that in the next 20 to 50 years, there will be major events. In the UK, for example, it is possible that rising levels of the oceans will result in large parts of East Anglia being flooded. Other changes, like extremes of heat and cold, are almost certain. A sharply rising oil price is inevitable, sustainable alternative methods for powering cars and airplanes are far from so. When these kinds of changes start kicking in, allied to possible destabilising geo-political changes, it is very feasible that we will move to a world in which zero or near-zero economic growth becomes as high valued, personally and nationally, as increased GDP and personal income are today.

We need to shift from our present ‘extrinsic’ values, in which we look outwards for self-definition, with goals and motives that are driven by reward and praise. Children raised in this way are more prone

not only to misery but also, to empty academic performances, ultimately burning out even if they are initially successful.

Instead, we need ‘intrinsic’ values, goals and motives driven by real satisfaction of authentic needs. That means a greater concern with the emotional than the material, being motivated by the pleasure of an activity for its own sake, rather than possible external benefits. Like children’s play, intrinsic activity takes the person into a state of ‘flow’, where time passes without your noticing, a state of full absorption. I witness this in my children every day, but adults can have lives like that too. Its achieved often by pursuing paid work that is interesting to you rather than seeking promotion or greater salaries – within a corporation, for example, putting interest in the work ahead of material gains. Oddly enough, that can actually lead to greater success, although it is not the purpose.

Intrinsically motivated populations tend to be more family and community minded. In societies like Denmark, for example, they are much more liable to be concerned about the well-being of any child who seems distressed in public or in terms of ethics, if a wallet is dropped, much more likely to hand it in. There are much higher levels of trust between people of all ages, less cynicism about government.

From the standpoint of psychiatric epidemiology, such a radical transformation in our values would be more than welcome. It would also change behaviour. As unemployment, shorter working hours and lower pay (with many workers accepting pay freezes) become established, we may be forced to look beyond the office for our sense of what matters. Perhaps the most radical and vital shift would be towards caring for our children ourselves when small and much greater focus on home rather than work identities. The time when society is organised to maximise the well-being of the majority rather than the economic profits of the few, may be not far away.