

# Luxury; the driver of progress?

- ★ Luxury was historically associated with sin, but over time the desire for new products came to be acknowledged as a driving force behind economic development and material progress.
- ★ We spoke to **Professor Christine Weder** about her group's research into the relationship between luxury and modernity, and the importance of luxury as a driver of innovation.

**The line between** what we consider to be the necessities of life and what is superfluous can always be drawn differently, and the concept of luxury has changed and evolved over time. Historically, luxury was often thought of in theological terms and closely associated with sin, but around the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century it was re-evaluated. "Luxury was acknowledged as the driving force



A reclining lady with a fan by Eleuterio Pagliano (1826-1903)

behind the circulation of goods and money, fostering technical progress and increased employment," explains Christine Weder, Professor of Modern German Literature at the University of Geneva. The main effect of this re-evaluation was a vastly increased ambivalence about the meaning of luxury, a tension between the positive and negative associations attached to it. "It's

1850, as greater levels of trade brought new products to more and more people. "There was a kind of democratisation and these goods became more common, so there was a less clear association with exclusivity," continues Professor Weder. Although exclusivity is not an indispensable component of luxury, the demonstration of it is often crucial to luxury in the sense of conspicuous consumption, the ostentatious display of wealth through purchasing expensive products. The concept of conspicuous consumption was developed by the American economist Thorstein Veblen, a harsh critic of what he saw as wasteful consumption, while he also considered the temporal dimension. "Veblen also used the term conspicuous leisure. People could use their leisure time

## Luxus und Moderne

Luxury and modernity: the ambivalence of the superfluous in cultural conceptions of literature and aesthetics since the 18<sup>th</sup> century

**Funding:** <http://p3.snf.ch/project-173369>

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Christine Weder is full professor of Modern German Literature at the University of Geneva. She studied German Literature, Philosophy, and Religious Studies in Zurich, Tuebingen and Cambridge (UK). She received her PhD from the University of Zurich with a dissertation on the magic of things in literature and theories around 1800, and did her habilitation thesis on the intimate relations between aesthetics and theories of sexuality around 1968. Christine Weder was visiting scholar at the Berlin Leibniz-Zentrum für Literatur- und Kulturforschung and at the University of California, Berkeley.

By the **18<sup>th</sup> century**, luxury was acknowledged as the driving force behind the **circulation of goods and money**, fostering **technical progress** and **increased employment**.

more complicated than simply saying that the negative meaning of luxuria as a sin turned into something more positive. We think that the meaning of luxury became more ambivalent on various levels," says Professor Weder.

## Luxury and modernity

Within the framework of an SNSF-funded research project, she and her group are examining the relationship between luxury and modernity, in which luxury is deliberately defined fairly loosely as those things and practices which are unnecessary, excessive or superfluous with respect to a measure, which is itself relative. One sub-project is focused on the Sattelzeit or transition period around 1800, which marked a significant shift in the conception of luxury. "There was a lot of debate about luxury around that time, with the fields of art and literature developing and becoming more autonomous. The consumer revolution also began around the start of the 19<sup>th</sup> century," she outlines. A second sub-project centres on what is described as the internationalisation phase from around

to demonstrate that they could afford to do nothing, for example just sit around and read," says Professor Weder. This is echoed to a degree by modern critics of the humanities, who argue that research in areas like history or literature is somehow wasteful in comparison to medicine, technology or other 'useful' disciplines. "The domain of the humanities is commonly seen as a luxury, often in a negative way," acknowledges Professor Weder.

A number of artists have tried to counter by arguing that art is not a luxury but a necessity. However, rather than trying to fend off the luxury label, Professor Weder suggests an alternative strategy to justify artistic and literary endeavours. "Let's admit that art is a luxury - and always has been. But it should be added that luxury can prove to be a driver of innovation not only in art, but also in fields such as science," she says. "Innovation arises not only from the need to solve urgent problems, but also from effectively overshooting the target, for example by gathering more data than is required for an experiment, which then leads to new insights."



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