



### Blood Lifestyle: Externalizing the cost of Human Life

*David Model*

Contemporary college education is rhetorically devoted to the dissemination of knowledge and skills that are deemed marketable in the contemporary and emerging globalized, high technology workforce. Important in this process are so-called “problem-solving” capabilities which embody pragmatism in approach and instrumentalism in method. Too often lost in the quest to furnish the current economy with “job-ready” graduates is the capacity for critical thinking in its larger and more important sense; that is to say the ability to question the political, economic and social arrangements that frame our society and the societies which we, as participants in the hegemonic capitalist culture, affect—sometimes for the better, but too often for the worse.

If we are to build postsecondary institutions that educate responsible citizens as well as competent employees and consumers, we must teach and learn ourselves about the context—domestic and global—in which work is to be done, and the purposes which our economic and technological development serve.

One aspect of that context is the tremendous human cost of modern prosperity. A moral inquiry into human suffering is surely at least as important as the passing on of the technical skills needed to keep the machinery in motion. A significant historical example concerns the ten million inhabitants of the Congo Free State who paid the price for King Leopold II’s greed and brutality when he opportunistically forced them into slave labour to extract sap from rubber trees to sell to the embryonic automobile industry in the 1890s. 1 The price of tires did not reflect the externalized cost of the slave labour nor the value of lives lost at the hands of Leopold’s military.

Today, externalization of costs insidiously hides cheap labour, unsafe and unhealthy working conditions, destruction of the environment and ubiquitous toxins which have worked their way up to the top of the food chain in mother’s milk.

Shockingly, human life has become an externalized cost as a direct consequence of the unsustainable lifestyle of people in North America. Literally millions of people have died or been injured as a result of our extravagant lifestyle which, for example, requires enormous quantities of fossil fuels for transportation and the manufacture of consumer or capital products.

Oil is the resource infused with the most blood. Despite media coverage of American military actions wars and the official information cascading from the White House, millions of people in Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia and Libya were victims of America’s determination to control the world’s oil supply. Millions of innocent people have been killed in Iraq alone and tragically their lives are part of the externalized cost of whatever

benefits were accrued as a result of U.S. invasion and occupation (Martin, 2005).

Paradoxically, due to our consumption habits and lifestyle, we are assigning a value to human life which can be calculated by dividing the resulting excessive purchases germane to perpetual unsustainable growth divided by the number of casualties who have become victims of the American pursuit of economic advantages.

Since World War II, growth in production as measured by the GDP has been the benchmark of economic success despite its critical flaws, not the least of which is the exclusion of quality of life factors in its calculation. Every president in the United States, every prime minister in Canada and every leader of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development countries (generally regarded as the 34 most prosperous and “advanced” nations) have referred to GDP’s essential role in measuring the health of the economy.

George Kennan, one of the major architects of U.S. foreign policy following WW II, succinctly delineated the plan to sustain continued growth when he warned that “We have about 50% of the world’s wealth but only 6.3% of its population. We cannot deceive ourselves that we can afford the luxury of altruism and world benefaction (Kennan, 1948, p. 509).”

In 1958, President Eisenhower proudly announced that: “There are solid grounds for confidence that economic growth will be resumed without an extended interruption.” His Chairman of the Council of Economic Advisors suggested that: “The issue—whether we shall shrink from or measure up to the challenge of potential abundance—is perhaps the supreme issue of the Twentieth Century (Speeches by US Presidents, n.p.)” Apparently, abundance overrides healthcare, education, stewardship of the environment and caring for the less fortunate members of society. Without exception, every Chairman and President voiced similar sentiments during their term in office (Speeches by US Presidents, n.p.)” Economic growth, whether sustainable or unsustainable, was apotheosized as a core value in the American zeitgeist.

To promote relentlessly growing unsustainable production of goods and services presumed a concomitant growth in consumption, challenging business mavens to develop strategies to induce consumers to perpetuate growing aggregate demand by ritualizing shopping and by obscuring more important values through insecurity, conformity and aspirations to meet the spurious and nefarious standards set by our culture.

Planned obsolescence, perceived obsolescence, technological obsolescence and omnipresent, pervasive and incessant advertising are the four major strategies that have been developed over the years to pressure consumers to shop until they drop.

Planned obsolescence is only common sense if you need repeat customers to maintain high levels of profits. If everything was made to last forever, your customer base would become seriously depleted.

Celebrities, supermodels and peers continually inform our sense of taste as to what is fashionable. Ask yourselves why automobile

manufacturers design new models every year. Have they been continually discovering more efficient and aerodynamic bodies every year since the first car rolled off an assembly line or have they discovered that people will buy cars more frequently if their car differs too significantly from the latest model?

Technological obsolescence is insidious due to the fact that new shiny, indispensable, alluring and irresistible techno-gizmos are perpetually paraded in front of our covetous eyes. First cell phones; then cell phones with cameras and computers, followed by iPods, iPad's and coby not to mention computers with exponentially more power and speed loaded with new exciting features.

Electronic products are encumbered with a myriad of external costs such as the public school children who work in coltan mines in the Congo (Vesperini, 2001), to say nothing of the women who work on the assembly lines in Chinese sweatshops dipping electronic chips into trichloroethylene without any protection for their hands or concerns about potential birth defects, all the greenhouse-emitting transportation between countries to ship resources, parts and assembled products and the toxic pollution spewed into the ecosystem when we discover that our once miraculous new gadget has become obsolete (Vesperini, 2001). Dumping electronic products in the waste bin means either incineration or burying them in a landfill resulting in the toxins assimilated during the manufacturing process to be released into the ecosystem.

The one external cost that is completely invisible and neglected in calculating the cost of a product is the price tag of all the damage to the environment and loss of human life inflicted on countries where cheap labour or resources were abundant. Developing countries have paid a steep price in order that wealthy countries can preserve their excessively opulent lifestyle. Notwithstanding that overall consumption is the problem, it disguises the fact that there is a widening gap between the rich and the poor and a shamefully inequitable distribution of wealth particularly in the United States. While the wealthy or upper middle class may be generating more economic or financial activity, a growing number of Americans and Canadians are struggling to remain afloat.

An interesting, though purely hypothetical, exercise would be to calculate the additional consumption in North America compared to some European countries and divide the difference by an estimate of the number of people who have lost their lives to imperialist, predatory interventions in developing countries. The result would be an extremely rough guide as to the value North Americans are unwittingly attaching to human life.

Norway has the highest United Nations Human Development Index (UNHDI) while the United States is fourth and Canada sixth. The UNHDI is a composite index reflecting a number of quality of life measurements such as life expectancy, education, literacy and standard of living. Since Norway has the highest index, I will compare its consumption levels to those of North America. In Norway, the annual personal consumption expenditure per capita was \$14,530 in 2005 international dollars and only includes the acquisitions of goods and services. Canada and the United States had expenditures per capita of \$15,094 and \$15,816 respectively in the same year and rank first and second on the list (United Nations, 2005).

In other words, to enjoy the highest quality of life as measured by the UNHDI, on average each Canadian and American only needed to spend, on average, \$14,530 per capita. In 2005, the population of Canada was 32,268,000 and the United States, 298,213,000.

To live a lifestyle comparable to Norway, the total expenditure in Canada would have been \$14,530 times 32,268,000 = \$468,854,040,000 and in the United States \$14,530 times 298,213,000 = \$4,333,034,890,000.

In fact, the total expenditure in the Canada was \$15,094 times 32,268,000 = 487,053,192,000 and in the U.S. was \$15,816 times 298,213,000 = \$4,716,536,808,000.

The difference in Canada was \$487,053,192,000 - \$468,854,040,000 = \$18,199,152,000 and in the U.S. was \$4,716,536,808,000 - \$4,333,034,890,000 = \$383,501,918,000. The total difference in North America is \$401,701,070,000 or roughly four hundred billion dollars. These figures represent the dollar consumption over and above the expenditure that would have been necessary to enjoy the same lifestyle as the country ranked highest in quality of life by the United Nations. Note that there is an implicit assumption in these rough calculations that greater material wealth beyond a certain point is not equivalent to a greater enjoyment in life. One of the tragic delusions in North America is to assume a directly proportional relationship between wealth and happiness without any limits. Health, family, acceptance, fulfillment, love and meaningful challenges are, to a large extent, factored out of this equation.

It would be a labyrinthine challenge to count the total number of people who have died in all the countries victimized by exploitation by the major powers; so, I will concentrate on two countries where the greatest number of people died as a result of intervention: Afghanistan and Iraq. Canada offered its full support to the United States in the bombing and attempted occupation of Afghanistan and its full support for the 1991 bombing and sanctions of Iraq.

In Iraq, according to Iraq Body Count, the casualty count for the 1991 war was 108,331 civilians (average of the lower and upper estimate). According to Ramsey Clark, former US Attorney General under two presidents, the sanctions were responsible for 1.5 million civilian casualties (PBS, 2002). Iraq Body Count estimates that 109,213 civilians were killed from 2003 to 2011 (average of lower and upper estimates). Therefore, the total civilian death count in wars and sanctions against Iraq total 1,717,544.

Human Rights Watch and the United Nations estimate that in Afghanistan, 16,913 civilians were killed from 2001 to 2011. The estimated total civilian death count for Iraq and Afghanistan is 1,734,457.

To calculate the external dollar cost of the human lives lost in North America's quest for oil is \$401,701,070,000 excess consumption divided by 1,734,457 civilian casualties = \$231,600. In other words, North Americans are inadvertently setting a value of \$231,600 on human life, since that is the externalized cost of human lives sacrificed to produce the excess products that were purchased in these two countries.

Although the calculated value of \$231,600 is an extremely rough estimate and fraught with methodological flaws, there is absolutely no question that human life is an externalized cost of North American pursuit of incessantly greater consumption. Despite the jingoistic shibboleths inundating us from the American administration and media, one of the major objectives in Iraq and Afghanistan was access and control over each country's oil.

Human life has no price. It is alarming that it is held in such low regard, and it is unconscionable that we pay so little attention to our own culpability in social injustice at home and abroad.

#### References

Martin, M. (2005). *The Fate of Africa: A History of Fifty Years of Independence*. (New York: Perseus Books), p. 96.

Iraq Body Count Project. (2007, February). Iraq Body Count. Retrieved 6 July, 2012 from [www.iraqbodycount.org](http://www.iraqbodycount.org).

Kennan, G. (1948). Review of Current Trends in U.S. Foreign Policy, Lot 64D563, files of the Policy Planning Staff of the Department of State, 1947-1953, published in *Foreign Relations of the United States, Volume 1* (Washington DC Government Printing Office, 1976) pp. 509-529.

Speeches by US Presidents. State of the Union Address Library. Retrieved from June 15, 2012 from [www.stateoftheunionaddress.org](http://www.stateoftheunionaddress.org).

Vesperini, H. (2001, August). Congo's coltan rush. Retrieved June 30, 2012 from BBC Web Site: [www.news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/Africa/1468772.stm](http://www.news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/Africa/1468772.stm).

United Nations. (2005). Human Development Reports. Retrieved June 8, 2012 from [www.hdr.undp.org/en/reports/global/hdr2005](http://www.hdr.undp.org/en/reports/global/hdr2005).

PBS. (2002) The Debate Over U.N. Sanctions. Retrieved June 4, 2012 from [www.pbs.org/frontlineworld/stories/Iraq/sanctions.html](http://www.pbs.org/frontlineworld/stories/Iraq/sanctions.html).

---

David Model teaches political science at Seneca College in Toronto. This commentary was informed by research associated with two papers presented to the British Society for American Studies at Cambridge University (2011) and the University of Birmingham (2012) in the United Kingdom. The author can be reached at [david.model@senecacollege.ca](mailto:david.model@senecacollege.ca).

◀ Contents

---

The views expressed by the authors are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of The College Quarterly or of Seneca College.

Copyright © 2012 - The College Quarterly, Seneca College of Applied Arts and Technology