

Ethical and responsible consumption

Summary presented to the “Ethical Consumption” platform of the Alliance for a Responsible and United World

Some thoughts on the contemporary culture of consumerism

In our society, maximising individual consumerism became a top priority with the rise of the modern bourgeoisie. Following World War I, housework became more automated and women began to work in industry and after World War II, mass consumerism flourished. The “age of the American dream” had begun; household consumerism intensified, especially with the purchasing of television sets (the vehicle for this new lifestyle). In the eighties, internationalisation of markets and capital let the consumer society born in the U.S. spread beyond its borders, with the subsequent universalisation of products and icons in all countries and languages. And the current globalisation process has now, by way of technology and the electronic media, disseminated the internalisation of a culture with a high degree of consumerism, individualism and immediacy.

Modern man has become addicted to fleeting, ephemeral, disposable goods. Objects lose their value as soon as they have been acquired, as minor modifications of shape, technology or style make the previous products obsolete; the accelerated rate of product replacement bestows them with a kind of pre-programmed obsolescence. Moreover, the lack of durability of low cost mass production guarantees that consumers will keep looking for new products. Typically, people do not attempt to repair objects, because it is easier to throw them away and buy new ones. Preservation and recycling are only a way of saving money in times of recession. But, aside from these short-term non-durable products, there are also products that are immediately disposable, manufactured for one-time use, such as plastic cups, “PET” bottles, etc., that generate serious environmental problems.

Although consumerism has been used as one of the key points in understanding many societies and eras, in modern society it has reduced the socialisation process to adulation of the object and turned the individual into a mere spectator. But the people of today, in spite of having access to four and half times as many consumer goods as their grandparents living at the turn of the century, and with a huge variety of technological comforts, have not experienced any great leap in their quality of life, because there has been no corresponding increase in their happiness and fulfilment. In the race to attain greater spending power, the sources of basic human satisfaction become relegated to a second plane. Immediate and fleeting pleasure perpetuates a feeling of frustration and dissatisfaction, because it creates dependency on life patterns that are external to the individual and that uproot and dehumanise him.

The “Modernisation of poverty”

One of the reflections of this consumer lifestyle is modern man’s inability to carry out everyday routine activities and, consequently, his dependence on specialised products and services accessible through relationships based on buying and selling. This situation originates in the fact that less and less time is spent on things that do not produce capital, such as the family, friends and a basic understanding of the way things work. The “modernisation of poverty” (Illich, 1978) refers, then, to the impoverishment of mental and

operational skills for daily problem solving, and this translates into consumer need. When this type of poverty prevails, a life without consumer goods or services seems impossible.

Plastic replaced ceramics, soft drinks replaced water, Valium replaced herbal teas and CDs replaced musical instruments. In this way, man has been losing the ability to respond to his needs with his own skills, and has become more and more dependent on money to satisfy those needs artificially. The modern world does not stimulate self-confidence and autonomy.

And this removal of the potential inherent in each person is not limited to daily tasks and specific knowledge (education, health, etc.) but also extends to the person's concept of the world. The worker/spectator/consumer is acquiescent, a conformist, he does not try to analyse the facts from a critical point of view, and he relinquishes any personal understanding of the world. He ends up believing that he doesn't have what advertising and specialists throw at him as a "need".

Modern man is more and more lacking in the necessary tools for his own autonomy. He has become unable to meet his own needs through his own experience. He seeks the freedom to overcome need's hold on him by means of satisfaction, forgetting that freedom doesn't mean the disappearance of need, but man's autonomy vis-à-vis his obligations. What remains is the feeling of "indifference" towards fellow man (now converted into a piece of merchandise), the origin of malaise and the contemporary existential void manifested in a desperate and unending search for consumer satisfaction.

Development and inequality: the bigger picture

Industrial and technological progress is identified with "the" process of civilisation. Communities that do not adopt this belief are scorned and marginalised by globalised society, which promotes the importing of lifestyles in the name of a self-justifying "modernisation". Today's powers developed thanks to the de-colonisation process, by creating and extending consumer markets and constituting national economies under the auspices of capitalism with differing levels of development. Countries not in possession of a share of the world market or the necessary financial and technological capital remain "undeveloped", because progress requires subordination based on relationships of domination and dependence and demands that they internalise an attitude of heavy self-criticism and condemnation. The countries that are today "lagging behind" in the progress stakes for years served as a springboard for the growth of the world powers. In other words, the current model for development is based on colonial exploitation.

"The standard of living in the wealthy countries of the North would not be so high if the colonised South had not been – and still is – so exploited. If all the work involved in making the products sold in the wealthy countries was paid as though for a specialised German worker, most of these products would be so expensive that only a small minority would be able to buy them. The concept known as "development" – which Vandana Shiva calls "maldevelopment" – is not an evolutionary, bottom-up process, but a process of polarisation, in which a few become richer at the expense of those who become ever poorer. Two hundred years ago, the western world was only five times wealthier than the poorest countries of today. By 1960, this ratio had increased to twenty and by 1986, to forty-six. The wealth of the rich countries is growing ever faster within a limited

world and this means that it is growing at the expense of the others, which I will continue to call "colonies"." (Mies: 1991, p. 38).

The imbalance that exists in North-South relations is what Vandana Shiva calls "maldevelopment", or a process by which socio-economic inequalities between countries become more extreme. And in turn this process of exploitation is repeated internally within the exploited countries; social classes become polarised and revenue more concentrated by way of the exploitation of fellow citizens relegated to extreme poverty.

The growing seriousness of the problems generated globally by the consumer lifestyle in the social, human, cultural, environmental and economic spheres leads us to pose certain questions: For how long will it be possible to maintain this kind of relationship between peoples? Is this kind of development desirable? Are we willing to bear the costs and the risks of this war against nature and man's own "humanity"?

Raising awareness and individual action – the smaller picture

In this context, small-scale human action raises numerous questions relating to ethical consumption which require each individual to take his own stance and become a social change agent.

A change of attitude to reality is urgent. The first step is to perceive this "extreme poverty" that is uncountable and has no colour, name or choice. It is characterised by basic deficiencies such as malnutrition, unacceptable housing, illiteracy and unemployment and it reveals an extreme inequality between the privileged and the excluded, the haves and the have-nots. This poverty is further oppressed by bureaucracy, by technology, by discrimination. It is inhumane, because it suppresses any notion of community. It is the result of an impersonal rationale and of a society that does not commit to resolving it and which blames the outcasts for their own shortages, backwardness, lack of education and underdevelopment. This is why we must take responsibility for the seriousness of the current situation. To abstain from this task is an inhumane act, because the possibility of feeling "shocked" and of taking action is the only thing that reveals the existence of any remaining "humanity".

Among the possible actions relating to individual consumerism, the first thing that comes to mind is to choose "green" or environmentally friendly products (with technologies that pollute less, minimum and recyclable packaging, minimum energy consumption, etc.). But we believe that certain questions must be posed in this debate: If the change of attitude is limited to choosing environmentally friendly products, are we really touching on the key issue, i.e., consumerism? Or are we simply strengthening what is known as *ecobusiness*?

The mechanisms for setting up a "green market" demand a market rationalisation that will create international certification institutions and networks such as ISO 14.000¹ and various green stamps that do not cast a doubt on the reigning model of development and consumerism. Once again, only the large privileged enterprises can afford to meet all the requirements, and the small local producers who work in a sustainable manner are kept away from the incentives to attain this kind of "stamp".

A politically alternative model of development requires sustainability criteria that are not based on the market, but on an ethical values debate, that is to say, on the need for action aiming at ecological and socially just levels and models of consumerism. As regards

1 Environmental certificate focusing on the analysis of production and services.

modifying the patterns of consumerism (choosing socially and environmentally correct products and services), one of the possible options is to reject products manufactured in conditions of domination and dependence and/or which harm the environment. Along these lines, a key issue today is the rejection of transgenic food, a process that once started out in nature, is considered irreversible, as well as having serious economic and social consequences (monopoly on seed and pesticide production, weakening of family farms, greater cost to the consumer, etc.), environmental hazards (loss of biodiversity, plagues of enormous proportions, genetic contamination, etc.) and health risks (laboratory animals manifest alterations to their immune systems and vital organs, allergies and carcinogenic effects), and in Brazil there are no regulations on compulsory and complete labelling of these products. That's why a generalised and critical awareness must be developed to allow people to understand the implications of individual consumerism. A boycott (why not?) of the manipulation and exploitation of humankind. Stop buying cheaper products because they're manufactured in China or Indonesia where the working conditions are sub-human – that's one step. Opting for environmentally friendly products that are slightly more expensive because they are produced on a lesser scale by associations of small producers – that's another. Because collusion with the system takes the form of alienated consumerism and daily relations governed by the principle of "taking advantage of your neighbour"; everyday bad habits created by an individualistic ideology, habits that are responsible for the cruel social imbalance that makes the news on a daily basis.

Aside from all this, the market needs and produces consumers that never say "Enough!" Is this really desirable? What will be demanded of us if we bow to the system? And what are the consequences to humanity of following this path?

Levels of consumerism (the volume of consumption of goods and services) are rarely mentioned because they are the taboo and the basis of a commercial society. One doesn't really question consumerism itself; that is, the unsustainability of the growing volume of products consumed daily by our society. The justification for this is that any debate on the limits would negate the very bedrock of commercial society, which does not accept any form of restriction on production and consumption, be it legal or ethical. In the absence of this notion, the destructive behaviour of a mentality based on consumerism and disposability is kept intact. Further stimulating the purchasing drive (which is at odds with rational and conscious choice) reveals that the line dividing the concept of need (the potential demand/self-control) from desire (structurally insatiable/control over others) is more and more blurred and it renews uninterrupted and uncritical consumption. This leads us to a fundamental question: What do we really need for living?

Shared challenges for ethical and responsible consumption

In our market-focused society, the environment and humankind itself are reduced to the category of merchandise. This is why the assumptions of the debate must be turned around, so as not to stimulate new ways of commercialising life and private ownership in the fight for environmental capital. A model of alternative development requires sustainability criteria no longer based on market logic but on a debate concerning ethical values. For this to happen, one must question consumerism itself, i.e., the sustainability of the growing volume of products consumed every day by our society.

An ethical and cultural outlook must be founded on a worldview able to offer support and solidarity in situations of extreme vulnerability suffered by a large part of the world

population and it must lead to an ethical attitude toward others and to nature. This involves no longer seeing the economy as the centre of everything and starting to introduce into the debate values that must be kept. Ethics must be the key concept that gives meaning. It must take up its place again. Society must choose between **BEING** and **HAVING**. The cult of the superficial and disposable image, along with the show provided by advertising, guarantee total submission to the manipulation of desires and emotional impulses. Our society has, in an unprecedented manner, separated the image from the content, condemning itself to a warped existential vacuum in a constant cycle of consumption as a means of satisfaction. Isn't now the time to rebuild this lost bond together? To join up the external with the internal to achieve greater coherence and personal fulfilment? But how can one propagate and multiply these thoughts and actions and translate them into wider social and political movements?

The stimuli inciting us to consume invade our space through the advertising found in every part of modern life (billboards on the street, adverts on TV and radio, etc.) and in order to resist them we believe it is vital to take action in two spheres: education and information. Education, to stimulate the forming of critical mindsets and the defence of an ethical outlook that respects and assumes responsibilities to Others. And information to provide the consumer with options, choice and power. Who are we supporting with our consumerism? Are we helping to maintain the relationships of semi-slavery of the companies subcontracted by the multinationals or are we contributing to small-scale initiatives that have a strong commitment to social and environmental issues? But how can we know which these products and goods are? How can we know if the lipstick we've just bought contains the hunger of the women of Bihar or the torturing of thousands of laboratory animals? Globalisation, by fragmenting the production processes off to countries offering greater competitive advantages, is an accomplice in the exploitation involved in goods production, because the patterns of second and third-hand outsourcing are an obstacle to any permanent form of control and tax regulation, even of the companies that declare themselves environmentally friendly. So it is crucial to uncover the exploitation inherent in goods on sale in order to turn the market relationships into specific personal relationships. This implies a learning process that questions the bonds we forge in our work and our private lives and the exploitative relationships that impregnate the products we consume. It also widens the individual's internal notion of subjective freedom and increases autonomy by means of a general knowledge of the nature, history and life of other countries, stimulating a rejection of conformism and trade manipulation. This knowledge can be spread and made systematic through organised movements relating to various themes (women, the environment, racial issues, workers). One must also take possession of the information channels (the internet, universities, social movements, etc.), creating mechanisms to obtain data, conduct campaigns, provide information and promote extensive debates on the relationships that are created between people on the basis of highly individualistic consumption. A fundamental strategy for this is the systematisation of alternative forms of interaction in the production processes, product circulation, social organisation, information processing, levels and patterns of consumption, etc. All these factors require us to learn to show responsibility and solidarity with the present and with life, consolidating knowledge that is committed to seeking solutions, and daring not only to formulate theories, but also to act. Systematising this information would then provide us with a tool for more correct decision making on what we need, what is indispensable and whom we are co-operating with through our consumption.

And moreover, is it not better for us and for humanity as a whole to willingly reduce our daily consumption, prioritising and rediscovering non-commercial values and means of satisfaction that are more direct and personal?

A movement directed at a “culture of permanence”, founded on sustainable consumption and an economy of solidarity, is incompatible with predatory consumer activity. Simple living implies each day establishing more direct and less pretentious relations with consumption, nature, work and, basically, life. It means the possibility of having a feeling of greater personal power and commitment, a balance between excess and shortage. But for this to happen it is vital to rediscover that the needs to attain “well-being” are not met by symbols of consumerism. The model of thought that governs current society creates obstacles that block our view of numerous non-commercial forms of satisfaction that do not involve purchasing products. One example is devoting more time to one’s relationship with one’s children, which has been replaced by consumption of toys and by the modern electronic nanny, the television. Substituting children’s consumer activities (shopping, watching TV etc.) with moments of sharing affection helps to detach their need for affection from material goods, meanwhile satisfying their need for love, protection, understanding, leisure, freedom and identity, which all generate considerable emotional and psychological benefits. But this attitude goes against capitalist logic, which depends on the creation and expansion of markets and which puts up fierce resistance through media advertising that presents consumerism as providing the best chances for personal fulfilment.

Because of the asymmetrical relationship between these forces, we need something more than individual skills to have the desired impact on the large capitalist corporations. A solid social and political movement is crucial. So, the challenge lies in finding ways to mobilise people, ways that are not restricted to the superficiality of “propaganda”, ways that can have a long lasting and multiplying educational effect. And this mobilisation of consumers in general should emphasise their differences within the process, be they national, regional, ethnic, etc., because we must not ignore the diversity of cultures and of real human beings.

*“Only when a considerable number of people are prepared to change their lifestyle and adopt different values, will politicians and businessmen follow them”
(Mies: 1991, p. 40).*

Will it be possible to build up a solid political, personal and collective will to reduce consumerism and reprioritise human “needs”? Or will this idea just be considered the reflection of a “retrograde” mentality or of “sterile idealism”? Can we not do anything to propose alternatives to the current situation? Is it better to conform to the *status quo* and sit back and do nothing or break out of this anaesthetised insensitivity and take action, creating other forms of relationship that value and respect life?

We believe that the debate on ethical consumerism should extrapolate the fight for individual, direct benefits. This struggle involves the universal right to a decent life, in other words, the possibility of sustainable consumption for all those who at the moment cannot consume anything, because they live in very different and distant realities to our own which are cruelly exploited by production and consumerism.

This text is a provocative one, and it deliberately queries many concepts, with the aim of inviting you to take part in this debate, which is vital for humankind and for our planet, both now and in the coming years. We have posed some questions and we now await your contributions to enrich the debate and together draw up a shared text with thoughts and proposals for action on this subject.

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