

CONSUMERISM AND THE ILLUSION OF HAPPINESS

Iustin Emanuel ALEXANDRU¹, Violeta BRAN², Alexandru TAȘNADI³

¹ The Bucharest University of Economic Studies, iustin_alex89@yahoo.com

² The Bucharest University of Economic Studies, violeta_bran@yahoo.com

³ The Bucharest University of Economic Studies, relationistul@yahoo.com

Abstract: *The authors draw from the idea that governments, corporations, traders and stakeholders feed us with a diet of consumption, with vain hopes and with an unsustainable production - consumption model. Becoming captives of stuff, we have little real proofs that this captivity leads us to a long term happiness. It is shown that the buddhist philosophy highlights the strong connection between attachment and suffering. The article mentions that people attach themselves, besides stuff, also to opinions, ideas, relations. We relate happiness, success and fulfilment to these external objects in hope that we will achieve a lasting happiness. In the end, we show that we live in a hedonistic world, in which the fulfillment of wants generate a supplementary want in the attempt to provide for a lasting happiness.*

Key words: consumerism; attachment; suffering; wants; happiness.

JEL Classification Codes: A12, D11.

1. INTRODUCTION

We often ask ourselves: why this lifestyle of exaggerated consumption? Why this kind of burdening consumption: things that one does not need, pretentious luxury, conspicuous consumption? Why are we not, however, happy with all this wellbeing surrounding us? Why does exist so much desolation within, in spite of the wide thriving? These are questions that nowadays man asks himself. Caught in the rush of life, he thinks that this lifestyle is destined to him, that unavoidable circumstances determine his fate, that nothing is to be done.

The present linear development model is dominated by the race for power and profit. It is a mercantile model leaving the impression of being mastered by a philosophy drawn from the “golden veal” of the society: money. This model is managed by greedy and diseased corporations that revolve around money. It has already been launched on air a well-known tune: “work-buy-consume-dye”, a synthesis of the routinized life that we live.

Contemporary philosophers speak about a “chaos point”, the point from which decline or salvation may follow. Therefore, researchers speak about, and propose new concepts: smart development, sustainable economic growth, responsible consumption, circular economy, downshifting, returning to sacred or simplicity.

Ecology and quantum physics are subjects that approach society in a holistic manner, showing that we live interconnected. Nature teaches us that we need to tend towards balance and harmony (Benyus, 2017) and for the time being the response to the mentioned problems brings about the internal solution (Janssen, 2007). It is with urgent necessity that we make a leap of conscience, a revolution of it, a crossing for an exasperated consumption to a responsible one (Francis, 2017).



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2. CAPTIVES OF CONSUMERISM

There is a psychosis of consumption: we are prompted in various ways to consume. Our desire is continuously stimulated “because we deserve it”. Wants have taken the place of needs. Advertising urges us: more, more and more... Commercials are very aggressive and children become certain victims, they are the buyers of tomorrow. Why this offensive of consumerism? We think of Buddha’s saying: wishes mean suffering.

Consumerism is a term coined and circulated by mankind. It refers to a lifestyle: addiction to stuff, wealth, power or pleasure. It has been formed a religion of consumption, a doctrine of consumption or an ideology of consumption expressed at its extremes by “black friday”, “Halloween”, “Valentine’s day” and other forms of extreme shopping or consumerism extravagance.

In line with economic progress generated by economic growth, by its propellers (production and consumption), technological progress is also underway. Often do we hear a commercial in the kind: “New technologies every day. Always here for you”. But we ask ourselves: did mankind become more human? (Popescu & Tașnadi, 2009) We do not believe that technology is bad or good, however, in the hands of wise men, in the hands of enlightened minds it may help a lot mankind, saving it from collapse, saving lives.

The anthropocentric solution based on misused technologies is opposed to the evangelical path, of spiritual nature. The spiritual emptiness of man that is generated by consumerism can only be compensated by walking on this path (Tașnadi, 2015). Leaders of mankind, technocrats of control (followers of corporatocracy) seem to use technology for creating a culture in which man is responsive to certain stimulus, as it may be the case with creating all the more captivating advertising and promoting them through various channels and devices.

The prevailing system defines itself through the omnipresence of its market ideology. This occupies successively all sectors of activity. The mentioned ideology permanently advocates for the next key words: “produce, sell, consume, accumulate”. Let us observe that the same ideology reduces the ensemble of human relations to the market relation and considers our planet a simple merchandise. The duty imposed by the system is servile work. The only right which it recognizes is private property and the only God which it venerates is money. Mass-media determines what is good and what is bad, what we can see and what we cannot. It promotes a culture of hedonism, respectively a consumer culture that continuously floods us with messages of the kind – materialism will make you happy!

Each individual that falls into the trap of consumerism takes part at the preservation and consolidation of this linear development model that works on the principle – consume, consume... throw away! In a documentary called the “Story of stuff” (based on the written research with the same name, by Annie Leonard), humanity is warned that the extension of consumerism policies generates disastrous effects. Such a harmful policy of consumption leads to piling of goods more than we need. The result is a plummet of natural resources and a degradation of the environment that mother nature offers us.

Consumption has reached such proportions because the market economy system that dominates production is based on two strategies:

- The strategy of planned depreciation;
- The strategy of moral depreciation.

The first one refers to mass consumption in which economic goods are made so as to break down as fast as possible and thus be replaced. The second one has in view the pursuit of consumers to throw products that are in perfect shape because of change in the design of objects (see the area of fashion). In fact, the main propellers of consumption are: advertising, fashion and credit (of consumption).

Commercials make us feel unhappy with what we have and become happy when we always buy something new (keeping up with the Jones). We are all the more unhappy as we have become captives of consumerism: we work more in order to consume even more and we have less spare time. We become a kind of compliant machines of the economy without a human face.

The words of Mujica Jose (ex-president of Uruguay) became famous: “We invented a mountain of superfluous needs. You have to keep buying, throwing away. It’s our lives we are squandering. When I buy something, or when you buy it, we’re not paying with money. We are paying with the time from our lives we had to spend to earn that money”. The poorest president at that time (same Mujica), stated: “Either you are happy with very little, without overburdening yourself, because you have happiness inside, or you’ll get nowhere. I am not advocating poverty, I am advocating sobriety” (Bertrand, 2015).

The central idea of Mujica’s philosophy is that the only thing one cannot buy is life. Life is short and it is a pity to spoil it running after stuff. Mujica’s words are clear: when we invented a consumer society, economy has to grow constantly – if it does not, it is a tragedy.

In other words, consumer society contradicts the Christian learning, the spiritual and human beings laws because it objectifies persons. No matter how much this society states the happiness of person as a purpose, following the law of consumerism, the man does not become a happy person, but a happy object. Consumerism opposes person for it is an empowerment towards separation. Exacerbation of wishes supported by consumerism does not lead to man’s fulfillment – it permanently cultivates greed, envy and separation between people.

3. VICTOR LEBOW. SHIFT OF DIRECTION

The shift of direction for modern consumerism begins after the 1950’. Victor Lebow, economist and promoter of sales, published in *Journal of Retailing* the paper “Price competition in 1955”. The essence of the new consumerism doctrine is stated in a famous phrase that has been highlighted by numerous publications, including the “Story of stuff” documentary that we have mentioned:

“Our enormously productive economy demands that we make consumption our way of life, that we convert the buying and use of goods into rituals, that we seek our spiritual satisfactions, our ego satisfactions, in consumption. (...) We need things consumed, burned up, worn out, replaced, and discarded at an ever increasing pace” (Lebow, 1955).

Reading over this thesis formulated by Lebow we notice that we have been driven on the way of consumerism as if we were blind. Governments, corporations, retailers and stakeholders feed us with this “consumerism diet”. Mass control in order to promote growth and welfare was obtained by connecting citizens to consumption. We saw us tied to “something” that offers little proofs that we might become happy in the long run.

For the Buddhist philosophy attachment in one of the drives that provokes human suffering. Thus, attachment generates lust, wishes and uncertainty. People do not get attached only to stuff, to material, but also to ideas, relations and the opinion of other persons. Therefore, happiness, success or life fulfillment is associated with these external means resembling to a certain extent to the “rat race” (Kiyosaki, 2000) in hope of reaching one’s goals. The present linear model of economic development having as logo “growth and welfare” managed to seduce and lead us to an external satisfaction. The most of us have adhered to the consumerism doctrine hoping that this will get us closer to the much wanted fulfillment. While still being on the consumerism ground, we find enlightened beings (that adopted other models, such as moderation, simplicity, wisdom, etc.) who tell and show that that happiness resides within (Gafencu, 2006). Non-attachment helps us to better explore the real meaning in life. On the contrary, a world of excess, of a consume which is not limited by moral, changes our perception

of reality. Attachment drives us into searching more and more moments of pleasure, thus entering a hedonistic world in an attempt of gaining happiness.

4. CONCLUSIONS

This paper highlighted some of the aspects that favor the development of a linear economic model, often disputed due to the negative effects it produces: pollution, resource squandering, the creation of a context for man's loneliness. Thus, although the need for an extended consumption was obvious for the generations which preceded us (and still is today for a great part of the world population within various societies), the way by which this need was met gave room for questions regarding the opportunity of the solution that was found. We understand that if there is a threat regarding shortage, there also is a threat that abundance bears with it.

Numerous scientists, politicians or activists – part of various fields of study – have signaled the problems generated by the way that people understand to satisfy their needs, the way they understand to produce and consume. On certain occasions these alarm signals were overstated, however, it is obvious that some of the highlighted threats are worth considering them. This paper is meant to add to these researches and call for the need of a greater awareness of the way in which people – as individuals and community – understand to use the resources that nature makes available to us. Certainly, with technological advances – finding of new production and recycling techniques, the use of waste for making energy – the fears regarding man's incapacity to provide for his needs have diminished, some people even advancing the idea of exploiting the resources of other planets in case of a potential shortage that mankind could face.

However, we, the authors of this paper, plead for paying more attention to a fundamental, yet simple economic principle, maybe so simple that it is so little considered: rationality – in accordance with the signals given by the scientific society, but also with the indications that nature does not cease to offer us.

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