

From Consumerism to Sustainable Consumption

An approach to criticism of modern western societies in the perspective of Erich Fromm's analytical social psychology and Rudolf Bahro's social ecology

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„danger of limitation of human growth“

„danger of exterminism“
(Edward Thompson)

„logic of salvation“
(Rudolf Bahro)

Lifestyle of Poverty

TRANSITION 1 →

Lifestyle of Overconsumption

TRANSITION 2 →

Lifestyle of Voluntary Simplicity

pre-consumerism

consumerism

post-consumerism

survival in misery

„good life“ in destructive abundance created by economical productivism

better life in human productivity (love and reason)

satisfaction of essential needs

satisfaction of needs irrelevant to the „purpose of life“

satisfaction of materialistic and immaterialistic needs in sustainable production and consumption without overconsumption

for example:

for example:

for example:

needs for food, shelter, sociality, and safety (which are „natural needs“ of all human beings)

need for mobile phone (which is an „untrue need“)

need for human growth by activity, love and reason, need for relatedness & contact (which are „true needs“)

Consumerism as a destructive power

- decisive characteristic of western lifestyles
- destructive power with exterministic effects
- destroying cultures of the so called third world
- extreme leveling of cultural alternatives
- danger of „self-destruction“
- stage of civilization far away from ecological stability
- vision of progress of the industrial age has failed
 - consumeristic economy
 - consumeristic way of life
 - consumeristic lack of freedom

Other effects of consumerism

- consumeristically organized forms of satisfaction create an ever further expansion of the material needs
- satisfaction of these needs harms the environment, hurts and isolates the human beings, and alienates them from neighbors
- consumerism as totalitarian complex forces the individuals to be loyal to mass consumption.
- the expansion of industrial mass production with its consumeristic lifestyle still goes on

The economical dilemma - criticism of western civilization

- the industrial developmental scheme requires a wasteful consumption in completion of mass production
- the exploitation of the natural resources is the unsolved problem of the industrial production of consumer goods
- the worldwide available resources do not permit any continuation or expansion of mass production

Subalternity in consumerism

- subalternity is an *objective social structure*, that generates the subaltern mentality
- the subalterns are the *basic elements of any hierarchy*
- to treat inwardly free people formally as subaltern produces subalternity
- subalternity means that the individuals accept a subordinate role in relation to alienating authorities (the flight to authority deprives of the right of decision)
- *subalternity*: „dependence; submissiveness, subservience“ - *subaltern*: „subordinated, without responsibility, intellectually dependent, being on a low intellectual standard“

Subalternity in consumerism

- the subaltern role determines the total social behavior in the whole life
- subalternity changes from a characteristic of the subfunction to the characteristic of an individual
- subalternity is an acquired tendency (disposition, habit, habitus)
- subalternity has the effect of irresponsibility in general
- subalternity concerns the large majority of people
- subalternity is an effect of the whole modern mode of production
- today subalternity is visible in the boundless expansion of the material needs
- subalternity leads to becoming alienated from community life

Capitalism

- The common features in principle, which interconnects capitalistic societies as class societies, is „the use of man by man“. (Erich Fromm)
- We are inclined to look at capitalism as system which surrounds us. However, capitalism is not only a structure given to us externally but it goes through our feeling, thinking and behavior, our habits in all areas of life. We permanently reproduce the existing social conditions in interaction with our psychic structure and our acting.
- Capitalism reproduces itself by increasing the needs of man in order to maintain production.

The social formation of man

- Agencies of socialization like family and school, work, university etc. mould the psychic structure of man
- To make his emotional and physical strengths available for social purposes, man is subjugated to authorities in an authoritarian society or to consumption imperatives in a consumer society
- Desiring something he can buy for himself aligns his impulses and gives him the state of deficiency
- The impulse to compensate his supposed deficits orients man to the world of consumer goods and up to a maximum of consumption

The social formation of man

- The longing for goods is a hidden search for respect, self-esteem, and self realization; it is realized by alienated work to get the financial resources to keep up with the common level of consumption
- The socially formed man thinks that he is doing something of his own free will, but what he does is what he has to do as a member of society
- freedom only exists as a feeling in the consciousness of people, but real freedom is not available (freedom is more than a feeling!)
- in their actions, feelings, and thoughts people are supposed to be obedient to the functional necessities of capitalist economy

Overcoming subalternity - overcoming consumerism

- Overcoming subalternity is the only possible alternative to the boundless expansion of material needs
- It is recommended to draw up an agenda to mobilize people who do not want to go on as they have been doing before
- The only alternative which can prevent an ecological catastrophe is the choice of a new lifestyle
- This way of life is determined by a sustainable production and sustainable consumer orientation

Concept of transformation

- The new way of environmental thinking is ecologically oriented. With the concept of „Voluntary Simplicity“ Richard Gregg (1936) describes an alternative of living in modern societies with its mass production and its mass consumption.
- Voluntary simplicity bases on inner and outer changes. Man has to choose a way of living with seriousness and honesty and without disturbing disorder and mental illness caused by too much property which is inconsequential for the principal purpose of life.

Concept of transformation

- Man has to give priority to inner and outer activities instead of bustling around and wasting his life energy. Voluntary simplicity means an order and a guidance of our energy and our desires under the aspect that we limit ourselves in certain respects in order to get in other fields of life greater abundance. This includes a careful organization of life for a desirable purpose worth living.

Concept of transformation

- The lifestyle of „voluntary simplicity“ prefers a lower level of consumption with underlying values such as independence and ecological responsibility, learning to think for oneself and the neighbour, taken all the social and natural circumstances into account

Concept of transformation

- Voluntary simplicity and sustainable consumption produce orientations of lifestyle which are turning away from materialism, rejecting consumerism, and preferring the „mode of being“ (Erich Fromm)
- If the greed for money and goods is reduced, stress and fear of life decrease at the same time

New types of lifestyle - „cultural-creative“ and „sustainable“?

- On the basis of empirical market studies the researcher Paul H. Ray and Sherry Ruth Anderson found out changes in the lifestyles
- They found a new growing lifestyle segment which they described as cultural-creative besides the traditionalistic and the modernistic social background

New types of lifestyle - „cultural-creative“ and „sustainable“?

- The acronym „LOHAS“, standing for „Lifestyles of Health and Sustainability“, comes from these researchers, too
- As type of new consumers LOHAS are covering already approximately 30 percent of the consumers in the USA
- But we have to ask whether the key terms „health“ and „sustainability“ are used in an one-sided and distorting way

Postmodern lifestyles - postmodern consumers

- The postmodern type of consumer appears to be self-oriented, acts with studied independence, environmental consciousness, and health-oriented, and prefers bio food.
- He is describable with the trias of „fitness, wellness, selfness“.
- In this type some trends are bundled, which are "sustainable" in an one-sided and restricted sense of target group oriented marketing.

Postmodern lifestyles - postmodern consumers

- In order to lie in the trend, and to open up new lucrative markets, the idea of sustainability is commercialized as health and joy of living, achieving the goal to have a lot of fun
- It is a level of consumption with high pleasure, fun and amusement with the promotion of good health
- It is not clearly visible that the new postmodern lifestyles in reality are part of the consumeristic basic structure

System-inherent limitations of damage

- the *postmodern lifestyles* are part of the strategy of „damage limitation inherent in the system“ and have the function to stabilise the present economics
- this *damage limitation* is practiced within the predominant economy
- The *longing for money and goods* is too great, and there is no willingness to abstain
- The *avarice* is limitless; money does not spoil; it can be produced and stored or invested indefinitely

LOHAS or LOVOS ?

- The opponents of the LOHAS- are the LOVOS-consumers which correspond to the „lifestyles of voluntary simplicity“ described above
- They are strictly orientated in a postmaterialistic instead of a postmodern direction and contrast with the consumerism in a distant and critical way
- they represent a future-oriented potential for the change of society and can be understood as an approximation to *homo integralis*

Bases of a new society (excursus)

„Man is entitled to get the primary position in society again. He never may be a means and never a thing which is used by others or by himself. The usage of man by man must be stopped, and economy must serve for developing man to higher levels. Capital has to go in the service of work, and things must be in the service of life. Instead of the exploitative and hoarding orientation as it was predominate in the nineteenth century and the receptive and marketing orientation, how it prevails today [in the twentieth century], the productive orientation must be the goal, that all social measures have to serve for.“ (Erich Fromm)