

Consumerism and exclusion in a throw-away culture

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Abstract. *Various sources draw our attention to contemporary problems such as irrational use of resources, pollution, and, even more alarming, the application of the market logic to human relations. Given this unfolding, we ask ourselves if the prevailing economic model has a human purpose. We show that consumerism, as an important feature of nowadays lifestyle, generates corruption, squandering, and addictions, which in turn lead people to an existential void, as psychiatrist Viktor Frankl put it. This being the status, we argue for a leap of conscience – a thorough consideration of how we act now and how we should behave if we want to maintain the various balances that make possible life on Earth.*

Keywords: consumerism, needs, lifestyle, throw-away, conscience.

JEL Classification: E21, Q56, Z12.

1. Introduction

Economy textbooks teach us that all economic goods go through a circuit that is specific to the “linear economy”, of the type extraction – production – distribution – consumption – disposal. Analyzing it with attention, let us notice that it is no longer sustainable. Several reports to the Club of Rome, beginning with “The limits to growth” (Meadows et al., 1972), demonstrate us that resources are limited, thus, exhaustible, the logical conclusion being that we cannot sustain endlessly a linear system on a finite planet. Annie Leonard, an international expert on problems of sustainability and environmental health, has put in scene a short documentary called “The story of stuff” (2007). Her documentary, whose ideas were expanded in a book published in 2010, brings about the toxic impact which consumerism and materialism have on nature, economy and their sustainability.

The onwards maintaining of a linear economic model will direct society towards collapse (especially due to some irreversible processes) because of the amplification of wasting and the severe damage of ecosystems and of the biosphere’s health. Conscious members of the human community have united their voices in order to signal the problem and the disaster to come, if not for the present generations, but eventually for those to come. Already from the 2012 World Economic Forum in Davos, the main theme of the summit was urging the participants to think about a “great transformation” meant for “shaping new models”.

Consumerism, as a process, caught roots within a modern ideology that daily brings us pollution, the irrational exploitation of resources, the corruption of governments, manipulation of minds and behaviors through advertising, the enslavement of technology and fashion, the “disease of shopping”.

Last, but not the least our papers draws from an Address of Pope Francis (2013a) in which H.H. highlighted a “deficient human perspective, which reduces man to one of his needs alone, namely, consumption”. Besides denouncing this strong orientation towards consumption, Francis, as other predecessors of him (see for example John Paul II in “*Evangelium Vitae*”, 1995), is concerned about the application of the market logic to human relations: “Worse yet, human beings themselves are nowadays considered as consumer goods which can be used and thrown away. We have started a throw-away culture”. Other concern thoroughly considered by Francis in “*Laudato Si*” encyclical letter (2015a) brings about the problem of environmental degradation.

Taking into consideration the signals that are coming, as we have seen, from activists, economists, the business environment, politicians and the clergy, we proposed to highlight through our paper the danger that the linear economic model involves for our present and future.

2. An economy of exclusion that instills suffering

We have previously exposed some considerations made by H.H. Francis on consumption, but there is much more to be discovered in the economic reflections of this religious leader. In fact, his writings and discourses abound in references to economics and one of these made the front page: “This economy kills” (Evangeliu gaudium, 2013). The remark was about exclusion, a feature of the actual society and economy: “How can it be that it is not a news item when an elderly homeless person dies of exposure, but it is news when the stock market loses two points?”. This reflection also gave the name of a book written by two journalists of *La Stampa* – “Questa economia uccide” (Tornielli and Galeazzi, 2015). According to Francis, the global crisis has its roots within a profound anthropological crisis. This manifests itself through the creation of new idols, the fetishizing of money and strengthening of the dictatorship of an economy without a face and without a human purpose. The attribute “without a face”, associated with the contemporary economy, is understood as being the expression of its carelessness and indifference towards the vulnerable persons that have entered in the category of excluded (the poor, unemployed, sick, old, persons with disabilities, etc.).

Although consumerism is being associated with abundance and happiness, a great part of the world’s population is living in conditions of daily precarity. These conditions amplify fear and despair which envelop the hearts of numerous persons, reaching the point where they live under their dignity of human beings. Although it is a mirror of material abundance, consumerism has provoked on a social scale a true “cancer of despair” which devours society. This social disease dwells within the inhuman economic models. In such an economy, “tentacular corruption” and “selfish fiscal evasion” have extended progressively to the point in which, for the time being, they have reached huge dimensions. There are attempts to neutralize this expansion of the economy without a face through ethics and solidarity (concepts that are considered outdated, obsolete). Ethics opposes the subjugation of human person by the consumerism ideology. Such an ideology promotes absolute autonomy of the markets and of financial speculations (which account today for a great portion of the total volume of transactions); neither has solidarity chances of triumphing in such an economy because it is declared as opposed to financial and economic rationality.

A change in the world’s economy supposes the change of attitude of the decision makers who are responsible for the economic and public policies. Regarding the new idol of the world’s economy, i.e. money, Francis states that it should serve and not govern. Here we talk about the various forms through which greed manifests itself.

The linear model associated with consumerism disrupts the authentic spirit of competition, continuously generating selfishness and conflicts.

Nowadays it circulates more and more the concept of “lost generation”, with reference to youth. By means of aggressive advertising, youth are being more and more attracted to the mirage of materialism with the consequence that they do not engage enough in a

life plan that would help them live a plenary life. This suppresses the authentic spiritual and cultural values of people. Having in mind the imperatives of life, highlighted by psychologist Alfred Adler: life lived in society, labor and love, we could declare that a person without a job or other fruitful activity lives under his dignity of human being. If the current global economy system has in its center a new “idol”, there are very few chances that people will occupy this center. Perpetuating such an economic system, without a face and without human purpose, generates daily suffering. This system shatters the trust in its “virtues” and deprives of hope a great mass of people. And then, fairly, economy students ask us why this globalized economic system that makes us so much harm is still accepted?

The economic-financial crisis that haunts the world for some years now, has amplified even more the fear and despair, has reduced the joy of life and increased violence and poverty. The linear model of economic development, based on consumerism, has gradually become a mentality that was accepted in a passive way, i.e. a form of resignation. Therefore, the adoption of a new economic model is required – one that opposes, to put it as Francis, „the economy of exclusion, the culture of throwaway, the culture of death”.

3. Interference of consumerism with corruption, squandering and addiction

It is obvious that one of the basic traits of contemporary capitalism is consumerism. The doctrine on which it is based states that the degree of society’s civility is directly proportional with the volume of goods and services purchased by the people of that society. According to the consumerism doctrine, thus you become a cultivated, serious, valuable person (see Figure 1).

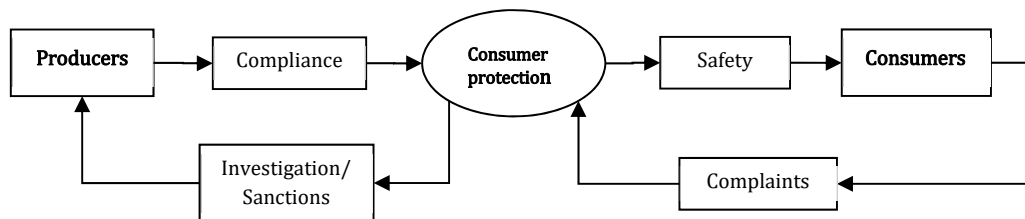
Figure 1. *Alleged degree of civility*



Therefore, society must protect you, thus appearing the idea of “consumer protection”. Behind it, stands a mountain of laws and regulations, and the attempt to apply them, through a heavy bureaucracy. But with all these measures taken to protect consumers from products

and services that could endanger them, are consumers really safe? Let us think just at the margarine assortments that are full of “E”-s, harmful to health. Here examples could continue with faulty financial practices or faulty agreements due to asymmetrical information. Seeing the great number of various consumer complaints, we ask ourselves if do institutions really protect consumers or do they mimic it? As it can be seen in Figure 2, consumer protection should be an important mediator between consumers and producers.

Figure 2. *The mediator role of consumer protection*



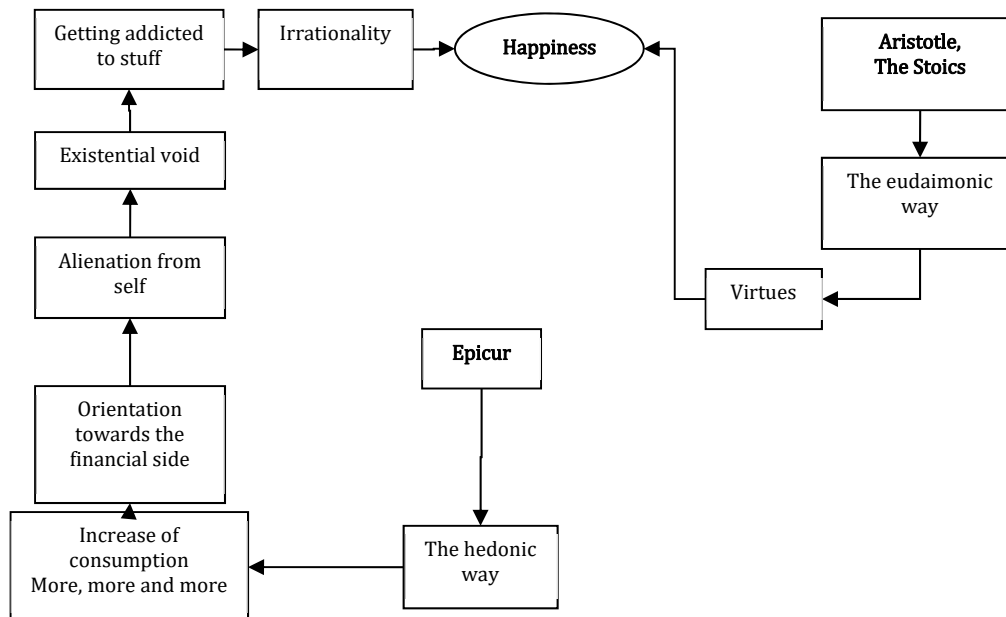
The consumer protection inspectors “warn” population to keep away from poisonous nourishment, but these lie further in shelves and windows. In other words, producers care for their job and further sell, on the way out being expected by profit. Consumer protection takes action when “the joke” gets serious and public opinion is offended. However, factories of toxic nourishment work round the clock (Séverac, 2010). This situation is due to the fact that producers are in a fierce competition to market products, in many cases traders resorting to corrupt means in order to sell them (see, for example, the Microsoft scandal in Romania). Within the systems that declare themselves democratic, population seems abandoned by the coalition in power: governments – corporations. Corporations make us feel that governments will be to some extent left out of business, as nowadays economy is global, whereas the latter are national. Gradually, corporations will become even more powerful and will control, at a global scale, investment and innovations.

A reliable partner of consumerism is advertising. This is the root of consumerism propaganda. The purpose of this partner is to convince more and more people to buy more useless goods that in fact we do not need. Under this influence, which sometimes is not perceived, and in the most of cases is underestimated, human behavior in consumer culture is often irrational and immoral. It is found to be in contradiction with the Christian view of human behavior, being in fact dominated by the passions (addictions) of wealth, power and pleasure. Society establishes what is moral or not based on arguments of current order, being however slightly willing to consider older wisdom. Living in the servitude of consumerism, men, as consumers, came to paraphrase a well-known assertion of Descartes (I think, therefore I am): “I shop, therefore I am!” – it is a motto appropriated by modern man. It seems that we have developed an instinct of consuming or possessing more and more stuff, although often we do not need these.

From a theological point of view, passions (to be understood as addictions), are considered responsible for overwhelming will, so that man is no longer a man of will, but

it is said about him to be subdued by addictions (Stăniloae, 2002). On a philosophical level, research on happiness developed on two directions: eudaimonic and hedonic. Beginning with antiquity, Aristotle considered that only man living within virtues (as principles and personal values) will obtain happiness. In the same time, Epicur considered that obtaining happiness is possible if pleasure is maximized and sufferance is minimized (Figure 3).

Figure 3. *In search of happiness*



Nowadays, a series of studies show that in this mercantile universe those who are extremely materialistic are not that happy, as advertising so often promises. This extreme materialism is connected to numerous artificial needs that lead towards maximization of pleasure (satisfaction – in economic terms).

In time, man becomes addicted in his attempt to maximize pleasure and this addiction determines a growing consumption which is larger than the natural needs of the body and of the soul. Thus, man becomes the servant of goods and services purchases. The climax of consumerism is reflected by Black Friday or China Singles' Day, when all prices are discounted and you furiously buy all that you do not need.

Consumer society is sustainable as long as consumers run money at an ever growing speed. Capitalism to be found in this phase passes through an acute crisis of resources because the process unfolds according to the principle: consume, consume... throw away. Humanity is being suffocated by waste.

As witness of a world that is going in a wrong direction, of a world that is exhausted by crises, the natural environment suffers, as well, because of the individualistic spirit and greed. Natural capital is being regarded as a business in liquidation with economic

liberalism reaching its limits. In society and economic activity, the spirit of indifference, of neglect is being instilled more with each day.

To sum up what has been said until now, the rush for profit generates anarchy in production that in turn generates the anarchy of consumption, exhaustion of resources and the increase of the quantity of waste. However, the toughest reality is that much of the foodstuff produced globally is thrown away in affluent societies, whereas hunger instills in the poor ones (to the time being, Yemenite people suffer enormously do to this plague). Pope Francis condemned consumerism and the “culture of squandering”, arguing that “whenever food is thrown out it is as if it were stolen from the table of the poor, from the hungry!” (Francis, 2013b).

The “shopaholism” dictated by consumerism is inspired by mass-media, by advertisement and financed by corporations. These suggest the consumer how to dress, what to eat or even how to think. Searching the meaning of life, man aspires towards considering that material well-being might be the supreme way of his liberation. The consumer society promises an affluent life. However, reality highlights the presence of an “existential void”, i.e. a life that lacks meaning (Frankl, 2009). In this context, we need to promote a new lifestyle, abandoning economic pressure and consumerism (Adamakis, 2010) and adopt a responsible ethic of our lives, leading to sustainable development (Georgescu, 2014).

4. The leap of conscience

Numerous studies highlight more and more the lack of sustainability of the traditional production – consumption models on which is based the linear economy. Some of them bring about the proliferation of consumption as lifestyle. Had we more planets, we could not have created a sustainable society in the context of present patterns of production and consumption.

The phenomena in often criticized, as we have already shown, from theological positions, with the goal of reaching to the conscience of every man. Let us see another excerpt of Francis, addressed at a moment in which the reach was very wide (on the occasion of the Nativity of the Lord, 2015b): “In a society so often intoxicated by consumerism and hedonism, wealth and extravagance, appearances and narcissism, this Child calls us to act soberly, in other words, in a way that is simple, balanced, consistent, capable of seeing and doing what is essential”.

With these words, Pope Francis tried to sensitize the consciences of the more than 1.2 billion catholic from all over the world. According to him, we need to pass from squandering and exacerbated consumption to simplicity, modesty, moderation and decency.

But this passing supposes a leap of conscience. In 1991, Vaclav Havel (at the time president of Czechoslovakia) addressed the following words to the joint chambers of the

U.S. Congress: “Without a global revolution in the sphere of human consciousness, nothing will emerge for the better in the sphere of our Being as humans, and the catastrophe toward which this world is headed, whether it be ecological, social, demographic, or a general breakdown of civilization, will be unavoidable”. Here, through “revolution of consciousness”, we understand a leap in conscience, a change of mentality, equivalent with Einstein’s thesis according to which actual problems cannot be solved with the thought that generated them.

There is a need of another thought. The option for another behavior in the process of consumption is highlighted by attitude. There is an interdependence of the type cause – effect between thought/philosophy of life (T), attitude (A), behavior (B) and the human beings’ lifestyle (LS), as follows: $LS = f(T, A, B)$. The leap of conscience supposes, in the first place, parting from the traditional paradigms through a process of unlearning (Popescu et al., 2016).

From this perspective, the spiritual dimension again acquires importance in our thinking. We have at hand the reservoirs of principles, values, ideals and Christian virtues. For instance, we should take into consideration when evaluating economic behaviors, some new “variables” such as greed, moderation, selfishness, hedonism, especially those known as passions (addictions): wealth, power, pleasure (Taşnadi, 2016).

Mankind’s objective for the XXI century resides in ensuring the common well. To this end, the survival of human being in the space of uncertainties and risks implies the development of a planetary conscience – it is desirable that it may be creative and full of compassion. The revolution of conscience entails a passing from opulence, from exaggerated consumerism to moderation, decency, wisdom or simplicity.

From a philosophical standpoint, consumerism is related to the philosophy of “to have”, and spirituality to the philosophy of “to be”. The material – spiritual binomial which develops with this occasion could be reflected by the binomial science – religion, whose essence is captured by a consideration of Albert Einstein: “Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind” (Einstein, 1995). Now, when being “consumed by consumerism”, a fundamental transformation of mankind implies the assimilation of a new vision. Years in a row, especially in the XX century, science tended opposing spirituality.

The latter was considered impossible to be proven because it was expressed from subjective positions. In those times, spirituality was ignored also because it could not be measured. As a result, all human experience accumulated in time that was of spiritual, mystical nature, was excluded from approaches, from the equation. But here comes, for example, a researcher who is known to the Romanian research community, Dumitru Constantin Dulcan, M.D., Ph.D., arguing that “thinking means transforming what is not seen in what is seen. The thought is creator, it is the most powerful weapon in the universe” (Dulcan, 2015). In other words, science, starting with quantum physics, discovers that subjectivity creates the universe.

After Renaissance, material imposed itself more and more in social philosophy. Today, the passing from needs to desires (boosted by the manipulative creation of Edward Bernays – Freud’s nephew), has gradually transformed consumerism in a genuine ideology of our days. The world that we have created is based on the features of classical, mechanical science. It is a cold world - dominated by calculation, rationality, narrow laws, where man is objectified. In a universe in which men are objects or numbers, only fear is perceived and the human being becomes more and more lonely (Stăniloae, 2002).

Some considerations that Pope Francis made in his address to The European Parliament (2014) are telling: “(...) there are still too many situations in which human beings are treated as objects whose conception, configuration and utility can be programmed, and who can then be discarded when no longer useful, due to weakness, illness or old age” – here it is again about the “principle of throw-away”. Furthermore, as a sharp observer, he emphasizes: “In my view, one of the most common diseases in Europe today is the loneliness typical of those who have no connection with others”. Interpreting this message in the context of our subject, let us observe that the expansion of consumerism will not lead to the healing of these social diseases – fear, hatred, indifference, or loneliness – as consumerism promotes a lifestyle that is strongly centered on personal needs, desires and interests.

We compensate the states of fear, distrust, and anxiety with an exacerbated consumerism, with “to have”. In this philosophy, we treat the living planet such as we treat ourselves or our peers: as something that must be subdued, controlled, manipulated or even killed if it does not respond to certain interests (it is about the will of power that was highlighted by Viktor Frankl, 2009). Mankind passes an interior crisis, a spiritual one, generated by the deficit of love, communion and compassion. This spiritual crisis generated an exterior crisis that pushes the living planet towards collapse. While humanity destroys its own house, we plead for a leap of conscience.

There is need of a profound change of the human being so as to perceive more and more the need of tolerance, compassion, kindness and love. Studies on the theme of happiness (its index) show men’s desire to increase their capacity of enjoying life. This responds to the need of joy emphasized by renowned French psychiatrist Christophe André (2013) and stated in a unique way by professor Dulcan: “We need joy as much as we need the daily bread”. Therefore, it seems that the merchandising of daily life, the density of events such as “Black Friday”, “Chinese Singles’ Day” – feasts with commercial flavor – do not fill the inner void, which is to be resolved through proper means, i.e. a balanced combination of material and spiritual.

Therefore, we have a lot of reasons to suppose that there might be a counter relation between the joy of living and the belief in “to have” (Figure 4).

Figure 4. *The convex combination material – spiritual*

Creation is a living integer formed by the profound link between people, other species, the natural and created environment, finally, the whole universe. In “the chaos point”, Erwin Laszlo (2006) was talking about the threshold of some irreversibilities, when something unrepairable can break in the balance of planetary life. Thus, it is obvious that the leap of conscious is a most urgent need of our times, this is if we want to save what we still have. However, as Schopenhauer pointed, “we seldom think of what we have, but always of what we lack” (Schopenhauer, 1896). The leap of conscience proposes the return towards inside and discovering the joy of living in balanced material - spiritual dimension of existence. Contrarily, in our journey through life we risk coming across with the “existential void” that was analyzed by Frankl in his famous book.

Conclusions

Within consumerism, happiness is assimilated with the volume of accumulated stuff, meaning that we are happy inasmuch as we have fewer unfulfilled wishes. However, mass-media in general, and advertising in particular, which constitute the reliable partners of consumerism, bring to our attention, every day, new products and services that we “must” experience in order to be a fulfilled person. This situation induces to the consumer a standard lifestyle for which a medium Romanian salary is not sufficient. This consumer complies without noticing to this standard and begins to desire things that he does not afford or that he even does not need. From here starts the rush for money. And when you cannot have what you wished, in the mentioned context, what else can you do but to become unhappy? From here starts a new problem: the relation between consumerism and depression, going up to existential questions.

Because the linear model of development that sustains consumerism is exhausting the planet of its resources, yet we think that things are still recoverable, we could conclude with a remarkable characterization of the creation which was made by Metropolitan

Emmanuel of France: “Ridiculed, beaten, and left dying of hunger, nature looks like the man whom the merciful Samaritan found and helped. Because behind the wounds hides the mysterious power of regeneration in the light of resurrection” (Adamakis, 2010). It seems that still there is hope, the question being, for how long will it still be?

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