

# ANTHROPOCENE AND HAPPINESS: A REFLECTION IN THE LIGHT OF COMPLEXITY

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## Abstract

The Anthropocene is a geological era marked by human influence on our planet. While on the one hand, it seems clear to us that we have never lived as well as we do today, on the other hand, various studies have shown that this lifestyle, marked by excessive consumerism, is a problem when we are faced with the urgent need to resolve climate change. The solution to this problem will involve education as a structural basis for building values and adopting more sustainable attitudes. We must reinvent ourselves in the face of the urgent need to mitigate one of humanity's greatest challenges. In this paper, we present a reflection in the light of the current complexity, based on a careful search for literature that addresses the issues associated with consumerism and its relationship with happiness (or the false sensation of it) and the role that education can play in this connection, against the backdrop of the search for more sustainable and environmentally friendly lifestyles that also promote happiness and well-being. Schools have been teaching notions of sustainability and ecology, but they still fall far short of the urgent need to solve the problem. We believe that the school, as an institution that risks functioning as an instrument for reproducing the status quo of current society, should promote critical awareness, promoting the transformation of the social reality that contributes to climate change.

Keywords: anthropocene, consumerism, climate change, happiness, society.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The consumerism we experience today has its roots in the Industrial Revolution, and more specifically in the capacity for high production and qualification of products. In this context, accentuated consumerism exists because modern society is characterized by the prevalence of emotion and desire, which makes people search more for compensation for these factors. Contemporary society is marked by superficiality or the throwaway culture. Today's reality is very dynamic: what is fashionable today is no longer fashionable tomorrow, what is right today is in doubt tomorrow [1]. In this context, companies have become the main beneficiaries of this social addiction, specializing every day in fomenting fantastical desires and emotions in human beings, claiming to be able to satisfy all the desires they stimulate. The more you consume, the more you want to consume, thus increasing the productive capacity of a system that damages nature. This type of scenario expresses a need to satisfy desires in order to compensate for emotions, and sets up an insatiable chain: production increases, the appetite for consumption increases, new products are developed, industries stimulate the purchase of these products and a cycle is set up that goes on and on. Climate change of anthropogenic origin is the result of our occidental lifestyle, based on uncontrolled consumerism, which has marked a new geological era, known as the Anthropocene. The beginning date of this geological era is debatable, but we believe it must have started with the planting of the first seed and the agricultural revolution [2]. This journey has posed new challenges in the field of education, which has to adapt to the circumstances of contemporary society and begin a new cycle in which a healthy symbiosis is found between society, the economy and the environment.

## 2 AGRICULTURAL REVOLUTION A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD

Before the Industrial Revolution, the agricultural revolution was one of the most controversial events in history. Some argue that it started humanity on the road to prosperity and progress, while others insist that it resulted in its downfall. It has been claimed that it was the turning point, the moment when Homo Sapiens abandoned his intimate symbiosis with nature and accelerated towards profit and

alienation. Agriculture helped populations to grow rapidly. Today, no agriculturally complex society will be able to return to the hunting and gathering of the past. Even in the beginning, the first farmers cut down forests, dug canals, cleared fields, built houses, ploughed ridges and planted fruit trees in organized rows, creating an artificial habitat intended only for humans, their plants and animals. From here, the farmers accumulated more and more "stuff". The ancient farmers might have looked miserable, but a typical family-owned more objects and artifacts than an entire tribe of hunter-gatherers [3]. Later came the Industrial Revolution, which led to the consumer society we know today and a world that pushes us to buy things we don't always need, but which make us believe we'll be happier with them. Even if "happiness" is not easy to define and can be analyzed from different perspectives, we can think of it as a basic emotion characterized by a positive emotional state, with a feeling of well-being and pleasure, associated with the perception of success and a coherent understanding of the world [4]. Well, it is exactly this feeling of well-being and pleasure, and even success, that we feel when we buy new "things", maybe because they are fashionable, or because they have better technology, or because we feel like we need them, even though we may not need them at all. However, several studies show that it is possible to be happier by leading a minimalist lifestyle, like the Hadza hunter-gatherers, who are happier than the inhabitants of modern societies [5]. The hunter-gatherer way of life differed significantly from region to region and from season to season, however, on the whole, the hunter-gatherers seem to have enjoyed a more comfortable and rewarding lifestyle than most of the farmers, shepherds, laborers and office workers who followed them [3]. Palaeontology shows us the lifestyle of these communities quite accurately from their skeletons. One example might be human height. Modern cases illustrate how better nutrition in childhood can lead to taller adults. Note, for example, that today we often have to crouch at the gates of medieval castles, built by a short and poorly-nourished population. The height of hunter-gatherers in the same regions at the end of the last ice age was a generous one-meter seventy-eight centimeter, and with the evolution of agriculture, the height dropped to one meter sixty. With the arrival of maize and its domestication, the number of cavities in the teeth increased dramatically, anemia among the first farmers quadrupled, only 1% of the population survived beyond the age of 50, and maize, considered one of the blessings of the first world, turned out to be a health disaster [6],[7],[8]. But not only in terms of diet the farmers were worse off. Compared to today's doctors and lawyers, hunter-gatherers had more free time and enjoyed a more rewarding and comfortable lifestyle. While people in cities work around 40 to 45 hours a week, hunter-gatherers, even in the most inhospitable areas like the Kalahari desert, worked 35 hours at most, hunting one day out of every three [3]. But, of course, we shouldn't romanticize this lifestyle too much and want to go back to this utopian world. In fact, the farmers of yesteryear are very different from those of today, and today's agriculture has brought us many nutritional benefits. So many, in fact, that today more people die from obesity than from hunger [9]. Even so, in the midst of the age of consumption, in the study by [10], it was found that a lifestyle based on minimalism makes individuals focus on prioritizing their values, with 85% of people reporting a connection between voluntary simplicity and well-being. This connection has to do with the fact that minimalists are able to control their desire for consumption and focus on psychological needs, such as autonomy, competence and relationships. The conclusion is that we don't need more material goods to be happy. Minimalism is a sustainable lifestyle in which individuals considerably reduce their material possessions, resisting the temptation to accumulate them. There is a positive relationship between minimalism and happiness, as the simple lifestyle emphasizes close relationships that are predictors of happiness [11].

## 2.1 Consumerism and Happiness

Consumerism of material goods has no positive impact on people's well-being in the long term. In some cases, anti-consumerism awareness leads, to a certain extent, to higher levels of happiness. Even so, we must bear in mind that happiness is influenced by other components: genetics, life circumstances, and the intentional activities carried out daily by the individual [12]. Contemporary society imposes the act of buying through advertising from the time children are still in their mothers' bellies. Consumerism depends on various factors, such as parental influence, media influence, financial situation and personality factors such as self-esteem [13]. The progressive view that we live better and happier lives than our ancestors can be controversial. We have to agree that in the last two centuries, modern medicine has defeated an army of diseases that attack humanity, from tuberculosis to measles, cholera and diphtheria. Average life expectancy has increased and global infant mortality has fallen. Obviously, this has contributed to happiness. The bad news is that pleasant sensations

quickly disappear. And human beings always want more and more, because the feeling of happiness felt with the previous achievement quickly wears off and we immediately feel the anguish of having to achieve the next thing in order to feel the same feeling of happiness again, as if it were a vicious cycle. This is all evolution's fault. Evolution has no interest in happiness: it's only interested in survival and reproduction. Evolution ensures that no matter what we achieve, we remain unsatisfied, which is why when we are satisfied, we tend to eat more. Happiness is therefore a homeostatic system. Just as our biochemical system keeps our body temperature and sugar levels within narrow limits, it also prevents our happiness levels from rising beyond certain limits. The only way to drastically increase overall levels of happiness is through drugs, genetic engineering and other direct manipulations of our biochemical infrastructure [3]. In evolutionary terms, nature does not select the happiest individuals, only the fittest, in a process that enhances fear and discourages contentment. Our chronically unhappy species is the product of such a process [14]. Permanent happiness is a human construct, an abstract idea with no equivalent in real human experience. Positive and negative affections reside in the brain, but sustained happiness has no biological basis. Biologically, human beings are not designed to be happy. Instead, we are primarily designed to survive and reproduce, like any other creature in the natural world. A state of contentment is discouraged by nature because it would lower our guard against possible threats to our survival [14]. A huge industry of consumerism, happiness and positive thinking, estimated at \$11 billion a year, has helped create the fantasy that permanent happiness is a realistic goal. Chasing the dream of happiness is a very American concept, exported to the rest of the world through popular culture. In fact, "the pursuit of happiness" is one of America's inalienable rights [15]. We live in a historical moment in which consumption permeates the social life of individuals and everything ends up revolving around what a person owns [16]. After all, what we consume confers status in society. Clothes, bodies, speech, leisure, food, drink, cars and houses are used as cultural signs and tell us who we are [17]. With this obsession to consume to be happy, human beings are destabilizing the global biosphere on several fronts. For thousands of years, Homo Sapiens has acted as an ecological serial killer; now it is turning into an ecological mass murderer. If we carry on like this, we will not only destroy nature, but we will also destroy the foundations of society [18]. But more dangerous than anything else is climate change. Humans have existed for hundreds of thousands of years and have survived several ice ages and periods of warming. However, agriculture, cities and complex societies have only existed for ten thousand years, giving a name to a new geological era marked by human intervention, the Anthropocene. Even if human civilization eventually adapts to the new conditions, no one knows how many victims may die during the adaptation process. Climate change and its consequences have already begun, are a present reality, and are caused by our consumerism, or our pursuit of happiness, in things [19].

## **2.2 Climate change and the limits of ecology**

Our consumption habits influence climate change because we increase our ecological footprint. Producing all the things around us (which we don't really need) causes greenhouse gas emissions that change the climate. Over the last few years, technology has managed to provide "greener" products with a smaller ecological footprint, but it's not enough to simply be "green", it's essential to reduce consumption [19]. In this sense, as educators, it is up to us, the children of the Anthropocene, to educate our children so that they don't make the same mistakes as before. Consumer society doesn't just concern adults; children are part of it and are influenced by it without distinction or differentiation of gender, age or social class [1]. It is in this society that children grow up and are educated, and they are also another target of consumerist culture. Children who do not reflect, without considering the needs of others or their own limits, are also included [20]. In this sense, children, as subjects with rights, are being turned into consumers as early as possible. In fact, different actions, when compared, show us that having a child in the occidental world, in an industrialized country, is what most contributes to climate change [21]. Overpopulation has been a controversial factor in the climate change debate. As we can see in Figure 1, taken from the study by Wynes and Nicholas [21], the authors state that having one fewer child in the occidental world can reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions by 58 tons for each year of life. More impactful than selling your car, avoiding long flights and eating a vegetarian diet, recycling, by far the biggest contribution to mitigating climate change is having one child or less.

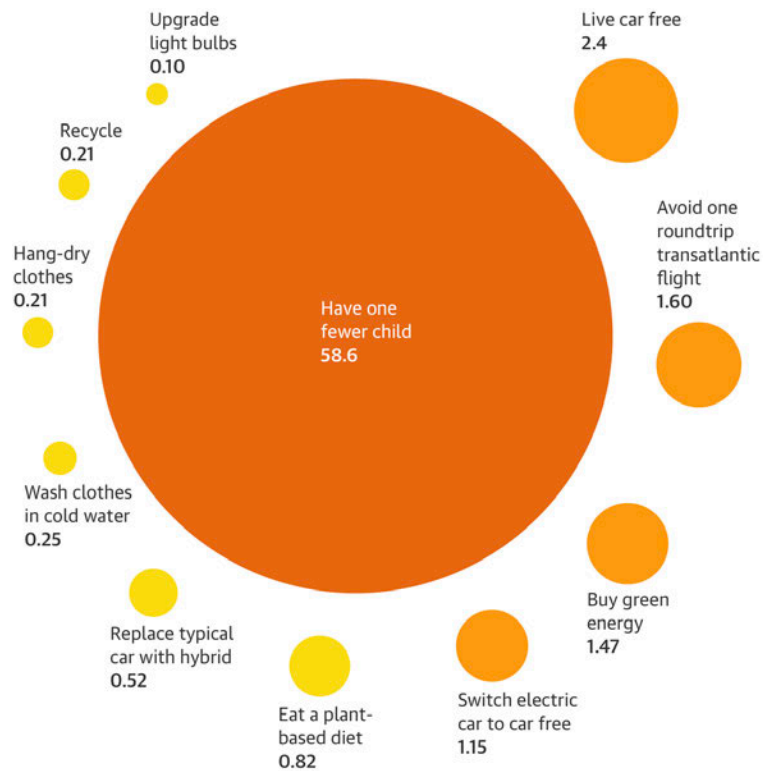


Figure 1. Impact of each action on carbon production [21]

however, it varies greatly depending on the country and continent we are considering. For example, in 2019, a child in the United States emitted more than 30 times as much CO<sub>2</sub> as a child living in Sudan [22]. However, with this reference, we are not, of course, trying to discourage anyone from not having children, we are simply bringing to light the impact that each human being has in terms of their ecological footprint. We are apologists that having children is a fundamental human right that can bring happiness and joy to families. But we must remember that 85% of the world's countries are developed, but this progress comes at a price, which puts the collapse of the ecology at risk. The population has doubled in 50 years, and the number of people living in extreme poverty has fallen almost sixfold [9].

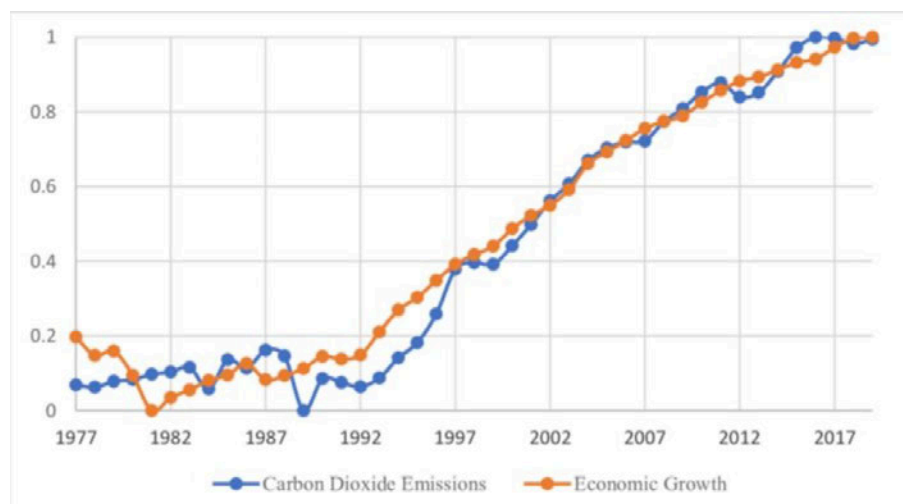


Figure 2. Evolution of carbon dioxide emissions and economic growth 1977-2019 [23]

Figure 2 shows progress in terms of buying power, less poverty, hunger, education, infant mortality and average life expectancy, coinciding in practice with the same graphs that trace the dramatic rise in global carbon dioxide emissions [24].

### 3 CONCLUSIONS

Having said that, we think that the school, as an institution that works as an instrument for reproducing new paradigms, should promote critical consciousness, promoting the transformation of the social reality that contributes to climate change. We shouldn't feed a world in which children are born and grow up thinking about money, valuing consumer goods and giving more importance to "having" than truly "being". The school must promote a change in this consumerist paradigm that is entrenched in our society. We must counteract this thinking that material goods give more social status, which leads individuals to become "slaves" of consumerism. Faced with this alienating reality, education must emerge as a fundamental pillar in the process of liberating individuals from this process. The key role of education is essential, giving people the chance to demystify this reality of a consumerist society. The consequences of climate change go beyond just the environment and are directly and heavily reflected in everything that concerns the survival of human societies and the prosperity of the world economy, such as the availability of water, food, energy, planning, the safety of coastal areas, health and well-being, fisheries, forests and agriculture, transportation and tourism [25]. We must remember that we are not trying to convince people not to consume, as societies have always consumed goods to meet their needs. What is at stake is the consumerist behaviour that has been naturalized in people over the last few centuries [26]. The challenge facing contemporary education is huge, both in terms of teaching about climate change and in terms of making a break with an education focused on consumerism. We have too much ambition for economic growth, believing it to sustain society, but only with a healthy planet can we aspire to social and economic stability. The current educational structure doesn't meet the demands of the environmental dimension, and education systems have left environmental ethics issues by the wayside [27]. There are obviously some attempts to teach notions of sustainability and ecology, but they fall short of the urgency to solve the problem, but the timing of the crisis forces us to act quickly and without delay. It's important to learn that in order to be happy and have quality of life, we don't really need 1001 gadgets. We need to break away from the idea that material goods are what define us.

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