

CONSUMPTION FOR THE FULFILLMENT OF HUMAN LIFE

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Abstract

The present moment is characterized by the syntagm of „hiperconsumption society”, as we assist to an unprecedented augmentation of our desires to consume, associated with a fundamental change of values. The study analyzes, based on the vast scientific literature, the causes and the effects of this hypertrophy of consumption, based on the assumption of Oswald „Economic performance is not intrinsically interesting... Economic things matter only in so far as they make people happier.” Also, as a new paradigm on economic development is being outlined in the economic science, using „health of the living” as a fundamental value, understood as an ensemble of parameters that create the frame for what must be a normal and desired evolution, we analyzed the means that are available and can be used for the transition towards a healthy model of consumption. From the perspective of consumers’ protection, we consider that education for a healthy consumption is an appropriate answer that can generate a durable change of the present pattern towards a more generous consumption from an intergenerational point of view that can also sustain a high quality of life for the generations that coexists and succeed themselves.

Keywords: healthy consumption, consumers’ education, the right to education, underconsumption and hyperconsumption, paradox of happiness, imperatives of human life

JEL Classification: A11, O10, O11

Introduction

In the economic theory, consumption is seen as the powerhouse of the economy, the main reason that motivates our efforts, offering happiness to individual consumers, but also having other favorable consequences on a societal level. In the scientific literature, consumption is studied from different perspectives. Presently some authors argue that an appropriate syntagm for the characteristics of the present moment is that of “hyperconsumption society”, as we’re functioning in an economy based on the continuous and aggressive stimulation of demand, on the permanent „creation” of new and countless „needs”, that we must immediately satisfy, in a society where the symbolic, identitarian

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value of goods acquired extreme importance. In a society where we are what we consume, the tendency to evaluate the human value in monetary terms is deeply rooted in the collective conscience and the quality of life is solely associated to the possibility to consume. But, if, as Oswald said, „Economic performance is not intrinsically interesting... Economic things matter only in so far as they make people happier.” and consumption was assigned in the economic theory to be the key for individual and social happiness, the relation income/consumption-happiness was considered to be an important matter of investigation. The belief that wealth is a necessary and a sufficient condition for individual and social happiness was tested in numerous empirical studies. The results were subject of important controversies. Different empirical studies using both macro and micro data for different countries and different moments in time reached a common conclusion: a significant increase of the real income per capita does not necessarily correlate to a similar trend in happiness. These results led to the naturalization of the term „happiness paradox”. The happiness paradox was subject of important scientific interest, not only from an economic perspective, but also from a psychological and sociological one and many distinct explanations were given for this situation. An explanation to which numerous authors adhered was grounded on the importance of relative consumption in the relation consumption-happiness, based on the idea that both the level of consumption of the individuals and the level of utility, happiness are significantly influenced by other people's patterns of consumption. In light of all these points it is clear that a multitude of studies, whether they are economical or psycho-social, prove the fact that an increase in income and consumption is not necessarily associated to an increase in individual and social happiness. Thus high levels of consumptions seem to be socially inefficient. Although the essential role of consumption for human existence cannot be denied, in the last years there were numerous alarm signals showing that the present practices of our consumption culture jeopardize our future. In this context, the basic concepts of the economic science – economic growth, labour productivity, consumption and so on – can only be looked at from a new and ecological perspective.

Under these circumstances if, as studies show, the excessive consumption of goods and services of our present time causes a series of problems on a communitarian and environmental level, without being associated with an increase of individual and social happiness, we considered that it would be timely to investigate the manners in which the transition towards a healthy model of consumption could be made. The healthy model of consumption is based on the assumption that the maximization of individual utility must be completed through the inclusion of cultural, social, ecological aspects thus satisfying the needs of today's generations would not compromise the chance of future generations to satisfy their needs, in the spirit of intergenerational justice, but also in the spirit of intra-generational justice.

1. The hyperconsumption, a characteristic of the present

The scientific literature defines economics as the science that examines the way in which the scarce resources are allocated in alternative ways in order to insure the satisfaction of the individuals' needs (Mankiw, 2004). In this context, consumption is seen as the powerhouse of the economy, the main reason that motivates our efforts. Adam Smith considered consumption to be the final scope of the whole production activity (Smith, 1976, quoted in Hansel and Schrader, 1997). The neo-classical economic theory assesses that the

satisfaction of individual needs is the key to universal happiness, according to the principle of utility maximization (Hansen and Schrader, 1997). Consumption, according to the economic theory, not only offers happiness to individual consumers, but also has other favorable consequences on a societal level, as it is considered the main motivational factor for labour and innovation, thus generating conditions for an increase of productivity and economic growth, consequently for a reduction of unemployment, thus having positive effects on a communitarian level.

The scientific literature demonstrates without a doubt that we are living in the „consumption civilization”, „civilization of desire” (Lipovetsky, 2007). We're functioning in an economy based on the continuous and aggressive stimulation of demand, on the permanent „creation” of new and countless „needs”, that we must immediately satisfy. Bauman (2005) considered that this society deserves its name of consumption society, as the modern society in its industrial phase deserved its name of production society, despite the fact that people were engaged in production activities from the beginning of humanity and they will be engaged in production activities until the end of the human species. The manner in which the society designed its members was dictated by the need to fulfill the role of producer. Presently, the members of the society must first play the role of consumer.

Actually, some authors consider that an appropriate syntagm for the present moment is that of “hyperconsumption society”, seen as the third phase of development of the consumption capitalism. According to Lipovetsky (2007), the first phase of the consumption society began in the 1880s and lasted until after the Second World War. This phase consisted in the formation of national markets, due to the development of modern infrastructures of transportation and communications, due to the fact that technological development allowed for productivity growths, but also due to the new labour organization and mass marketing. This phase created a limited mass consumption, as the financial resources of the great majority of consumers were insufficient for them to benefit of many of the available goods. Lipovetsky shows that, for example, in 1932, in the United States, there were only 740 vacuum cleaners, 1580 ironing machines and 180 electrical kitchen ranges for 10.000 people. The access to this type of products was even more limited in Europe. In France, in the same year, there were 120 vacuum cleaners and only 8 electrical kitchen ranges for 10.000 people. After 1950, the second phase of the consumption society was characterized by economic growth, increase in labour productivity and significant increase in purchasing power. The access to durable goods has become more or less general, sustained also by the expansion of crediting. The lifestyle that was previously accessible only for a few people became practicable for individuals from different social backgrounds. The mass marketing was replaced by the segmentation strategies based on age and socio-cultural factors.

The beginning of the third phase of development of the consumption society, the hyperconsumption phase, began towards the end of the 70s. This phase was associated with a strong development of capitalist economies, generating an unprecedented increase in the vocation for consumption. “The plentiful era is inseparable of an indefinite enlargement of the sphere of desired satisfactions and of an incapacity to resorb the urge for consumption, any saturation of a need being immediately accompanied by new demands.” (Lipovetsky, 2007, p 30)

The consumer of the hyperconsumption society is more and more informed, his tastes change rapidly and they are profoundly individualized, thus the firms must make important efforts to keep up with his needs and desires, both through complex investigations and

through a rapid process of innovation and renewing of the products, by increasing their variety.

In the hyperconsumption society the symbolic value of goods acquired extreme importance. Through consumption we create our identities – what we chose to consume communicates our belonging to a certain group, expressing our values and interests.

People perceive themselves and they are perceived as consumers in the majority of the spheres of their lives. The leisure activities, that, not long ago, were taking place inside the family or the community, are now mostly associated with consumption of different products and services. The scientific literature shows the fact that beyond the standing consumption, motivated by needs of prestige, experiential consumption appears to be a characteristic of the hyperconsumption economy, a behavior that is less influenced and coordinated by perceptions and social rules, an individualistic consumption model, for experiential satisfactions, whether they are emotional, sensorial, esthetical, relational, and so on. (Lipovetsky, 2007)

In a society where we are what we consume, the tendency to evaluate the human value in monetary terms is deeply rooted in the collective conscience and the quality of life is solely associated to the possibility to consume (Bauman, 2005). This identitarian pressure created the context for more and more individuals to choose to allocate most of their time to work. Studies show that the number of goods considered to be absolutely necessary is increasing. In 2000 approximately half of the Americans believed they couldn't afford all they needed. Surprisingly 33% of the people from the higher quintile of income considered they couldn't afford all they needed (Busch, 2008). Studies show that most goods are purchased as a symbol of status. Because of the fact that the society extremely values the ability of individuals to reach a high standard of living, people are evaluated based on the goods they own.

And some authors estimate that this type of behavior will expand beyond the borders of the developed countries, becoming generalized. „Are we already living the moment of post-hyperconsumption? That is not the case in my opinion; the most probable scenario is that of extension of hyperconsumption to a global scale, in a period that doesn't have any other believable alternative system: soon millions of Chinese and Indians will enter the spiral of abundance and of more and more sophisticated paid services. Lets not be naïve: neither the ecologists' protests, nor other models of consumption, more sober, will depose the growing hegemony of the commercial sphere; they won't lead to the derailment of the high speed consumerist train, they won't counteract the avalanche of new products with shorter and shorter life cycles. We are only at the beginning of the hyperconsumption society, presently there's nothing capable to stop or even brake the progress of transforming the experience and lifestyles in merchandise.” (Lipovetsky, 2007, p. 13)

2. Happiness in the hyperconsumption society

A strong economy is desirable because it allows us to live happy and fulfilling lives. As Oswald said „Economic performance is not intrinsically interesting... Economic things matter only in so far as they make people happier.” And consumption was assigned in the economic theory to be the key for individual and social happiness, so the relation income/consumption-happiness was considered to be an important matter of investigation.

The belief that wealth is a necessary and a sufficient condition for individual and social happiness was tested in numerous empirical studies.

The results generated a lot of controversy. Different empirical studies using both macro and micro data for different countries and different moments in time reached a common conclusion: a significant increase of the real income per capita does not correlate to a similar trend in happiness. These results led to the naturalization of the term „happiness paradox”.

The name of Easterlin is especially connected to this term. In 1974, his study based on longitudinal data for the United States, covering the period of 1946 – 1970, showed that, although the real income per capita doubled during these years, this fact was not associated to a similar trend in self perceived happiness. According to his studies, although for the individuals of a certain country the income is a good predictor for individual happiness, in international comparisons between countries income is not such a good predictor for the medium level of happiness of a country.

The studies that included data for the developing countries, offered the needed information for the sketching of a theory on the causes of this paradox. A study on 22 countries showed that in countries with higher GDP, the correlation between income and happiness is weaker (Veenhoven, 1991, quoted by Drakopoulos, 2008). It has also been demonstrated, for the United States, that happiness increases in correlation with the GDP until a level of approximately 10.000 dollars per capita, and that a supplementary increase of income is not associated, beyond that threshold, to an increase of happiness (Frey and Stutzer, 2002, quoted by Drakopoulos, 2008).

All these studies generated the idea that the relation between income and happiness is curvilinear. For lower levels of development an increase of the income generates an increase in happiness for the members of a society, but beyond a certain threshold the income increase doesn't have significant effects on happiness. Besides, it seems that the peak of happiness in the United States was in 1957, after that, although the real per capita income continued to increase, the happiness declined (Schor, 1991, quoted by Drakopoulos, 2008).

Layard (2005) also endorsed this idea, considering that once a country stepped beyond a threshold of economic development, its medium level of happiness becomes independent of the per capita income and that the relative income is extremely important for explaining the „happiness paradox”. From his point of view, happiness would be correlated to the absolute income only if the income was low. For individuals that are not struggling with poverty, it's the relative income that influences their level of happiness. This means that an increase in everyone's income doesn't lead to a happiness increase because, from a comparative perspective, the income increase loses relevance. Layard consequently pleads for certain policies – such as a certain taxation form, that might solve this „paradox”.

A recent study is Happy Planet Report (2006), of the New Economics Foundation, which, based on an online survey on 34000 Europeans, showed that people report a level of satisfaction regarding their quality of life that is comparable no matter if their lifestyle involves a pattern of consumptions that would use the resources of 6 planets like ours or just the resources of one planet. The researchers of New Economics Foundation concluded that, under these circumstances, if economic growth doesn't necessarily mean a greater

satisfaction regarding life quality, the decision makers should analyze the possibility to promote policies to reduce demand.

The connection between happiness and consumption is also mainly explained in the scientific literature based on relative consumption, based on the idea that both the level of consumption of the individuals and the level of utility, happiness are significantly influenced by other people's patterns of consumption.

There are numerous explanations of the fact that our peers influence our consumption levels and patterns, as well as of the paradoxical relation happiness – consumption. Some of these explanations that were analyzed by Dutt (2006) are synthesized in the following paragraphs.

The fact that others purchase certain goods may act as a form of publicity. When we observe other people consuming we may get in touch with certain desirable properties of the goods that may increase the degree of desirability of those goods, which may lead to a change of our consumption pattern.

The literature also refers to the action of „consumption norms”. If the great majority of people consume a certain good, this will lead to a consumption norm with impact on the subsequent consumption behavior for that certain good. Although the consumption norms have stronger effects for goods of high visibility, they might also be applicable to other goods, because in certain situations, not respecting consumption norms might affect the self-esteem of the individual.

The increase of individual consumption, from a relative perspective, can be explained based on the concept of status. If we accept the assumptions that the individual has a higher status in the hyperconsumption society when he has a higher income (Bauman, 2005) and that wealth is only visible through consumption, we might assume that in order to reach a higher status individuals will increase their visible consumption, comparing to other people's consumption.

Certain studies argue the paradoxical relation income/consumption-happiness starting from the idea that the real income necessary for satisfying a certain level of needs increased and that people must consume more goods and services for satisfying the same needs. Dutt (2006) explains the decrease of goods' efficiency in satisfying customers' needs based on the idea that if an increasing number of individuals use more expensive products, the cheaper substitutes may be discontinued, since the demand for them might not be high enough to be profitable.

The relation consumption – time offered another potential explanation on the fact that an increase in consumption is not associated to an increase in happiness. The increase in consumption implies in many situations an increase of the time dedicated to work, which means a reduction of the time for consumption and also for other activities. The present rhythm of consumption makes us work longer. Consequently we are affected by stress and fatigue; we suffer from burnout, with negative consequences on our physical and psychological health, on families, communities and on the citizenship. As a consequence of our raging desire to consume we are now more productive than ever, but we continue to feel that our needs are never fully satisfied, no matter how much time we use for their satisfaction. In 1977 Fred Hirsch affirmed that the increase in consumption is associated to a lack of time, because time is mostly dedicated to consumption and to obtaining income

for consumption. Social relations – the family, the friendship, the community – suffer in this situation of time pressure. Statistical data sustain this hypothesis. Although the new technologies generated significant increases in productivity, the working hours didn't decrease dramatically over time (European Commission, 2006). We must also mention that not only the quantity of time dedicated to work, but also its quality is important. The valorization of consumption might contribute to the decisions of individuals to take jobs that are unsatisfying from an intrinsic perspective, but that offer a better pay, which may lead to an increase of stress, with negative effects on the quality of life of the individual.

Another explanation is based on the important role played by advertising activities that rather create needs. In other words the supply creates the demand. From this point of view, the increase of consumption is not associated with an increase in happiness because individuals buy, under marketing pressures, things that they don't really need or that don't correspond completely to their needs, but also because the introduction of new goods on the market might negatively affect the state of individuals through a phenomenon known as "the choice paradox".

Access to different crediting instruments may be another explanation on consumption increase that is not associated to a happiness increase, as the level of plunging into debts also increases.

Professor Ruut Veenhoven dedicated an entire life to the research on happiness and quality of life issues. His interests focused also on the relation between consumption and subjective wellbeing (Veenhoven, 2008). His conclusions show that a decrease of the level of consumption would generate a slight decrease of subjective wellbeing, but that it would be only temporary and that we can live happy lives in the situation of a more prudent, intentional and intergenerational generous consumption. A sustainable pattern of consumption of this generation would have positive effects on the state of subjective wellbeing of the next generations. Veenhoven grounds his assumptions on the study of numerous data bases and information obtained through surveys that took place in different countries and in different periods of time focusing on the relation between income, consumption and happiness. Contrary to Easterlin, Veenhoven estimates that the per capita income of a nation is a good proxy for the quality of life of the country's citizens, but that the law of diminishing returns also applies in this situation: the higher the level of richness, the lower the supplementary satisfaction generated by increases in income. In fact the study of Stevenson and Wolfers (2008), although contradicts the theory of the saturation point, affirms that after a certain point, happiness increases slower than income, in concordance to Veenhoven's point of view.

The apparent lack of correlation between consumption and happiness found explanations in the psychological theories also. Some psychologists consider that every individual has a characteristic level of happiness, to which he returns over time, even if different life events make him move away from this level for periods of time, in a negative or in a positive direction. The psychological theories of adaptation support the idea that people are indeed happier when there is a positive change in the level of consumption, as happiness is presumably not determined by a certain level of consumption in itself. The consumption of a new good or service generates satisfaction only for a period of time, after that the individual gets used to the new consumption pattern that doesn't offer him satisfaction anymore, but being deprived of it might generate negative reactions. (Dutt, 2006)

Psychologists tried to explain the mechanism of overconsumption, in the situation that, as studies seem to prove, an excess of consumption is not associated with happiness increase. The evolutionary psychology considers that this behavior is reminiscent from the ancient past of humanity, when this behavior of accumulation of goods was important for survival. The evolutionary process selected the individuals with higher tendencies of accumulation. Thus, the tendency of accumulation became an integrative part of our genetic baggage, even if it makes no sense in the present moment as it doesn't contribute to our survival anymore. „Man, the naked monkey doesn't even have fur to keep him warm. For millions of years he's been having a very difficult existence and he struggled to feed his body and keep it warm. Only later the science thought him how to produce without struggle. This plenty is so new for us that now we plunder it without any sense, wasting our irreplaceable resources and filling the world with our trash. We exhaust ourselves in producing and consuming.” (Szent-Gyorgyi, 1981, p. 217)

We cannot forget to mention the conceptual objections regarding the relation income/consumption – happiness. There are authors that rise objections regarding the psycho-economic approach of the concept of happiness, as happiness is a phenomenon that is too personal and subjective to be studied with scientific rigor. The terminological difficulties were also mentioned, as the term of happiness is being used with different meanings. The validity of the measures made on individual happiness is also questioned, as people have the tendency to answer in a manner they consider desirable and they are strongly influenced by social norms. Also, they aren't always capable to assess exactly what they feel.

In light of all these points it is clear that a multitude of studies, weather they are economical or psycho-social, prove the fact that an increase in income and consumption is not associated to an increase in individual and social happiness. Thus high levels of consumptions seem to be socially inefficient. As Szent-Gyorgyi (1981, p. 217) said: „Material goods and a high standard of living are admirable and worth fighting for only if we don't have them. Once we've had them we realize they cannot fulfill human life.” Consequently we must investigate consumption alternatives, in accordance to the new paradigms of the economic science.

3. Education for another pattern of consumption for the fulfillment of human life as an important tool of the protection of consumers' rights and interests

Although the essential role of consumption for human existence cannot be denied, in the last years there were numerous alarm signals showing that the present practices of our consumption culture jeopardize our future. There's been an exponential increase of concerns regarding the negative aspects of hyperconsumption, even at the high level of the world's organizations that actually have the power to initiate actions and policies with a real impact on this phenomenon. What we choose to consume and the quantities in which we consume influence the way and the degree in which we put our mark on the environment. The negative effects of our consumption behavior on the planet are so obvious that in 2004 the Worldwatch Institute dedicated its annual report to this subject, showing that presently the ecosystems are degrading in a more rapid rhythm then their rhythm of recovery. The European Union acknowledged in its documents that presently the most important challenge for the economies is that of integrating the environmental

sustainability to welfare and economic growth. Doing more with less is a key objective of the European Union. European Union documents show that this objective could be reached if we improve the environmental performances of our products all along their lifecycle, if we increase the demand for sustainable products and if costumers are given the support they need to make informed decisions. On the 16th of July 2008 the European Commission presented an action plan for sustainable production and consumption.

Amartya Sen, Nobel Price winner in economics declared in 2008: „Development cannot be divorced from ecological and environmental concerns. Indeed, important components of human freedoms—and crucial ingredients of our quality of life — are thoroughly dependent on the integrity of the environment.” (Supporting statements for HDR 2007/2008)

In fact the Human Development Report HDR 2007/2008 that focuses on climate change shows that in the process of development the human being is the central value. “All development is ultimately about expanding human potential and enlarging human freedom. It is about people developing the capabilities that empower them to make choices and to lead lives that they value. Climate change threatens to erode human freedoms and limit choice.” (HDR 2007/2008, p.16)

In this context, the basic concepts of the economic science – economic growth, labour productivity, consumption and so on – can only be looked at from a new and ecological perspective. From this point of view the new economy is, normatively, an economy based on a new set of values that are also assessment criteria, but also the final scope of our efforts to generate a new global conscience. The fundamental value is that of health of living (Popescu, 2006), understood as an ensemble of parameters that create the frame for a normal and desirable evolution. This value-criteria and final scope is also a rule of assessment of our actions. Our actions are meaningful when they assure or they are in accordance with the health of the environment, communities and institutions, individuals, families and organizations. They are distorted meaning when they create prejudice from the point of view of this value of health to individuals, families and organizations, communities, institutions and environment.

The health of individuals, families and organizations, communities, institutions and environment is the fundamental premise for the fulfillment of human life. The man and the fulfillment of his being and of his life are fundamental values in the „Era of practical responsibility” (Popescu, 2006), in an economy that functions as if „the humans, the society and the environment matter” (Popescu, 2006), an economy integrated in the whole living, acting for the welfare of the whole living. The new economy will approach the processes and the phenomena that are included in its area of study from the perspective of the health of the whole living, considering the health of individuals, families and organizations, communities, institutions and environment, all of these being seen as living systems.

Under these circumstances if, as studies show, directly or indirectly, the excessive consumption of goods and services of our present time causes a series of problems on a communitarian and environmental level, without being associated with an increase of individual and social happiness, we considered that it would be timely to investigate the manners in witch the transition towards a healthy model of consumption (both from a biological and from a social perspective) could be made. The healthy model of consumption is based on the assumption that the maximization of individual utility must be

completed through the inclusion of cultural, social, ecological aspects thus satisfying the needs of today's generations would not compromise the chance of future generations to satisfy their needs, in the spirit of intergenerational justice, but also in the spirit of intragenerational justice. Because „...every day people die of starvation and malnutrition. In the same time, others somehow abuse of their freedom, which is directly connected to a desire of consumption that is not controlled by morals and this abuse limits the freedom of others, of those that suffer important deprivation and are dragged in bigger misery and poverty.” (Pope John Paul II, 2008, p. 36)

In a meaningful economy not only the negative effects of overconsumption on the environment and on the individual's life matter. We must also underline the catastrophic effects of underconsumption for a large number of people, not only from the developing countries, but also from the developed ones.

The model of consumption in the market economy is based on the idea of consumer sovereignty. The consumer makes consumption decisions that influence the production decisions of firms, thus influencing the evolution of the economy. According to the economic theory the firms adapt the supply to demand through a process of trial and error, which on the long term leads to an efficient allocation of resources (Hansel and Schrader, 1997).

Nevertheless there are studies that put under questioning the reality of consumer sovereignty, motivating their doubts on a multitude of facts (Hansel and Schrader, 1997):

- The information that is obtained by the producers is always imperfect as the needs and desires of the consumers are continuously changing and they are very different from individual to individual;
- The producers are not only trying to identify the demand, but also to influence the development of demand;
- The financial restrictions influence the consumption decisions of the individuals;
- The consumer is confronted to a series of systematic informational deficits, as the possibility to manage a fair and complete information on the offer at a certain moment is very difficult, but also because some goods have certain qualities that can only be verified through direct experimentation or with the help of experts;
- The consumer is confronted with information deficits regarding his own needs.

All these factors raise a question mark regarding the sovereignty of the consumer.

Nevertheless we cannot deny the responsibility of the consumer for his decisions and also we cannot deny the fact that the consumption decision influences, at least on the long run, the production decision.

That is why we consider that *a healthy model of consumption has as a cornerstone the responsibility of the consumer for his consumption decisions.*

Recent studies on consumer attitudes that took place in the developed countries show that the social and environmental concerns penetrated in the conscience of the individuals on a large scale. As a matter of fact, 96% of the Europeans declare that environment protection is important to them, and two thirds declare that it is very important. In the United States

one in four consumers adheres to the environmental values (World Business Council for Sustainable Development, WBCSD, 2008). In the World Values Survey 53.645 people in 69 countries were questioned during 1999 – 2001 regarding the importance that every individual gave to the protection of the environment. Surprisingly 49,5% of the respondents on a global level made their option for the protection of the environment, affirming the priority of this objective over the objective of economic growth for the creation of employment.

Nevertheless studies show that there are *important differences between the attitudes of consumers (that reflect, at least for the developed economies, an understanding of the social and environmental responsibility) and the consumption behavior*. A study that took place in Brazil, Canada, China, France, Germany, India, Great Britain and the United States showed that 53% of the respondents are concerned about the impact of their consumption decisions on the social and environmental welfare, but they are not willing to change their consumption patterns, blaming it on financial constraints and on the fact that moving towards this type of consumption would mean a reduction of personal comfort – products that are difficult to access, with certain characteristics that are inconvenient (The McKinsey Quarterly, 2008, quoted in WBCSD, 2008). It seems that the main barriers that stand in the way of changing the responsible attitude in healthy consumption are due to the lack of desire to give up a lifestyle perceived as comfortable, lack of desire to support the associated costs, perceived as being higher compared to those involved in a pattern of consumption that doesn't take into consideration the social and environment impact, but also the tendency of the consumers to act in accordance to the consumption norms existing in the group. Also, the fact that the advantages on an individual level and on a short term are less clear to consumers is an important factor in explaining the differences between attitude and behavior (WBCSD, 2008).

The legal frame regarding consumption must support the development of a *responsible consumption behavior*. The authorities must create the appropriate frame, but the process of behavior change depends exclusively on the consumers. A change of consumption behaviors implies important changes of values and lifestyles that cannot be imposed through rules and laws. As Kaiserling said „anyone who desires to improve the external conditions must begin by making the man be better on the inside” (quoted by Szent-Gyorgyi, 1981, p. 208).

For this change, an important role is given to actions of *consumer information and education*, in order to offer him access to all the data for an assessment of products from an ecological and social perspective. Although presently there is a richness of information and ITC technologies make access to information easy and cheap for a lot of people, it is important that this information should be trustworthy, easily understandable and accessible.

Studies also show the fact that the environmental and social impact of product utilization is more important than the environmental and social impact of production methods (WBCSD, 2008). That is why *the information and education of consumers for a responsible use of products* is very important.

Presently, even in the developed countries, consumers' education is not a developed and well represented policy area; there is a lack of regulation with a direct destination for this area, which is often presented as a secondary element of the consumer protection policy.

Consumers' education is not perceived, not even in the developed countries as a legal obligation of the state (OECD, 2009).

Also, studies show that only very few countries tried to identify consumers' needs of information and education. Most countries develop actions of consumers' education in an ad-hoc manner for solving punctual problems without integrating them in a general strategy of education, that might have an important role in making this type of initiatives more efficient (OECD, 2009).

The education for a healthy consumption is a complex, multifaceted process. An important role must be given to the formal education that, according to United Nations Environment Programme experts, should be implemented with a binding character in the primary and secondary education. But beyond the integration of education for a healthy consumption in the compulsory education that may have significant effects on the consumption patterns, an essential role is held by the informal education, from the familial environment or sustained by other influences from the environment. An important impact on the value system that is the base of the present consumption pattern is held by the media message that unfortunately, presently acts in a disorted meaning, promoting the non-values of greed and excess. Also the intergenerational information exchange, through the values transmitted inside the family is a very important element in the shaping of the pattern of consumption.

The policies of promoting a healthy consumption have little impact on the familial influences or on other external influences, but they can promote the integration of the healthy, sustainable consumption theme inside the compulsory education cycles.

Studies show that numerous aspects that are connected to the theme of consumers' education are already integrated in different courses that are being taught at different educational levels in numerous countries (UNEP, 2009). But there is a lack of cohesion of these approaches. There is no common point of view on the values that should be promoted through the education for a healthy and sustainable consumption, on the concept of the quality of life that a healthy consumption should support. On the level of the educational content that must be taught, the theory, the scientific data and the practical aspects must be combined, as it is difficult to connect the taught content to the everyday life of the beneficiaries of the educational act that are confronted to the prevalence of other values, sometimes in complete opposition. From the perspective of the motivation of the beneficiaries of the educational act to receive in an opened and favorable manner the information transmitted, the teachers are confronted to passive attitudes and to a feeling of lack of power of the individuals that consider that their actions cannot have the impact to generate a visible change.

Education for a healthy consumption in a society that is under permanent change cannot be a static domain; on the contrary, it implies a permanent adaptation to new social and economic conditions. That is why we consider that a first step towards a consistent and coherent education for a healthy consumption should be made by research that should be in the position to offer up to date and relevant information on the impact of household consumption on the environment, on the communities, organizations and families, on what healthy consumption means in the concrete area of everyday action and on the way in which an environment friendly consumption can also sustain the wellbeing of the consumer. According to the new paradigm that is developing in the economic science, asserting the need to surpass the fragmented approach of the economic phenomena,

education for a healthy consumption must be characterized by a multidisciplinary approach, its themes reflecting the holistic aspect of life, the interconnections of the consequences of our everyday actions. As the scientific literature shows (UNEP, 2009), the education for a healthy consumption should promote knowledge regarding the environment, elements of civic training and information regarding the legal rights of the consumer. We consider that beyond all these elements, education for a healthy consumption has a less punctual mission, its objective being that of developing a new value frame, in which the human value wouldn't be judged based on individual's material possessions. For this achievement, beyond the economic, ecologic and ethical elements, the socio-psychological approach would play an essential part in the desired change of values.

This type of multidisciplinary approach would allow the individual to become a reflexive consumer taking informed decisions, having the possibility to obtain, assess and use information regarding the consequences of his behavior, capable to decode the media and advertising messages in the context of his own values and of his own definition of what the quality of life means, but also in the context of an intergenerational justice.

Education for a healthy consumption is an essential part of the protection of consumers' rights and interests, as it is an efficient instrument for informing the individuals on their rights as consumers, for preventing financially risky behaviors, for promoting reflexivity in the consumption behavior and for the development of the necessary skills for an intelligent self-governing.

That is why we adhere to the point of view of the UNEP experts (2009) that plead for the concentrated action of governments for a healthy, sustainable and equitable consumption on the following directions:

- Promoting the necessary measures assuring that the educational institutions reflect in their daily management the principles of a healthy consumption behaviour;
- Including the themes of healthy consumption in the curricula of compulsory education;
- Sustaining research in domains connected to healthy, sustainable consumption, that would offer the informational base used in the educational programmes;
- Sustaining collaboration between researchers, trainers and other stakeholders in the economic, ecological and social field, thus creating the context of an integrated approach of the area that could be used as an information base of the educational effort for a healthy, equitable and sustainable consumption.

Conclusions

We *conclude* with the vision for the future of Lipovetsky (2007, p. 322): „Together with consumption capitalism, hedonism has imposed as a supreme value and mercantile satisfactions as one of the privileged ways to happiness...But in the hypothesis of new modalities to assess material satisfactions and immediate pleasures, a new manner to think over education is required and society will make way for another type of culture. The next move will imply new scopes and senses, new perspectives and priorities in life. When happiness is less associated with the satisfaction of countless needs and with the permanent

renewal of objectives and entertainments, the cycle of hyperconsumption will close. This socio-historical change doesn't imply giving up to material wellbeing or the disappearance of the organization according to market principles; it implies a new pluralism of values, a new appreciation of the life cannibalized by the order of the versatile consumption."

For a change of this magnitude, education is the appropriate solution and an important role will be held by consumers' education. The development of a coherent and operative frame of action for this type of education, both internationally and nationally, is an essential step for the transition towards a healthy model of consumption, biologically and socially, based on the consumers' responsible behavior. Education for a healthy consumption is an essential part of the protection of consumers' rights and interests, as it is an efficient instrument for informing the individuals on their rights as consumers, for promoting reflexivity in the consumption behavior and for the development of the necessary skills for an intelligent self-governing.

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