

# American consumerism –



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Consumerism seems to have gotten into every aspect of modern life. Even those areas of life that were not previously affected by the marketplace, have to adapt to the new reality, where consumer is in control. Steven Miles even said that consumerism has become “ the religion of the late twentieth century” (Miles 1). Consumerism is a phenomenon that was always immanent in the relatively developed societies, where people purchased goods and consumed resources excessive to their needs.

However, there was a major change after the Industrial Revolution, when the scarcity of resources was overcome and a huge variety of goods in unlimited amounts became available to a wide range of people. The Industrial Revolution and several other factors created capitalism – a new type of economy that resulted in a rapid growth of a middle class in developed countries. Middle class started to have money not only to cover their basic needs but also more. In 1899 Thorstein Veblen called it the “ leisure class” (Veblen 22).

But who do we call a consumer? To consume means to use things up, either by eating them, wearing them or playing with them and otherwise using them to satisfy one’s desires and needs. Since in the capitalist society money is the mediator between desire and satisfaction, to be a consumer normally means appropriating things destined to be consumed: buying them, paying for them and barring others from using them without permission. And to consume also means to destroy.

According to Bauman, “ consumed things cease to exist, literally or spiritually”. They are either used up physically (for example eaten or worn

out) or lose their allure and are no longer attractive (an overused toy or an overplayed record) and therefore unfit for consumption (“ Ideas and shared solutions for sustainable ; low cost green living” ). To buy and to own has become Western society’s essential urge. As the information technologies developed, the power of mass media grew.

To support a profit-based capitalist economy the ruling class, which owned the means of production had to convince the middle and lower classes to buy and generate profit. And here’s when mass media stepped in.

Advertising – as the main engine of sales process, has played a huge role in consumerism’s spreading and development. Newspapers, TV commercials and billboards screamed about new ketchups, cars and cottages, convincing us to buy and buy and buy.

The mass media also made modern consumerism borderless and international. With satellite TV channels and Internet you can sell anything to anyone in the world. International consumerism is a result of globalization, which reduces the number of borders in our world. It is done so by the establishment of transnational corporations, development of transportation, industrial, information and communication technologies.

Miller (as cited in Miles 2) explained people’s relationship to production as the factor behind consumerism A series of trends which have led to an overwhelming concentration on the area of production as the key generative arena for the emergence of the dominant social relations in contemporary societies, and a comparative neglect of consumption, together with a concomitant failure to observe the actual changes which have taken place

over the last century in the balance between these two forms of interactions with goods.

Bocock (as cited in Miles 4), when speaking about consumption said that as a set of social, cultural and economic practices, together with the associated ideology of consumerism, [it] has served to legitimate capitalism in the eyes of millions of ordinary people. McCracken (as cited in Miles 3) thought that In Western developed societies culture is profoundly connected to and dependant upon consumption. Without consumer goods modern developed societies culture would loose key instruments for the reproduction, representation, and manipulation of their culture????

The meaning of consumer goods and the meaning creation accomplished by consumer processes are important parts of the scaffolding of our present realities. Without consumer goods, certain acts of self-definition and collective definition in this culture would be impossible. Steven Miles insisted on a careful distinguishing of “ consumption” and “ consumerism”. According to Miles, “ notion of consumerism can be said to be of more sociological interest than consumption.

So, modern consumerism has been formed under the influences of corporate politics, the commercialization of culture (more and more intellectual, cultural and spiritual “ goods” are produced) and the impact of mass media. People started to have more money – and they started to consume more. What is the real problem behind that? Rip Cronk in his essay Consumerism and the New Capitalism contended that the traditional Western society’s values are degenerating under the influences of consumerism. For the public

at large, the integrating and transformative experiences of culture have been replaced by the collective viewing experience and by participation in consumer trends. The American public has been inundated by an unending parade of commodities and fabricated television spectacles that keeps it preoccupied with the ideals and values of consumerism (Cronk). Indeed, as consumerism is based on constant purchasing of new goods and services, with little attention to their true need, durability or environmental consequences of manufacture and disposal, as it is driven by advertising which creates a desire to follow trends results in materialism as a major life philosophy.

Consumerism replaces normal common sense desire to have life's necessities with artificial and insatiable search for things and money to buy them with. An intended consequence which is promoted by those who profit from consumerism is the acceleration of discarding of the old, either because of durability or a change in fashion. Landfills are full of cheap discarded products that fail early and cannot be repaired. Products are made psychologically obsolete long before they actually become worn out.

Over 220 Billion cans, bottles, plastic cartons and paper cups, are thrown away each year in the “ developed” world ( “ Ideas and shared solutions for sustainable ; low cost green living” ). As reported by National Geographic News, almost 1. 7 billion people worldwide are now part of the “ consumer class” (National Geographic refers to them as “ the group of people characterized by diets of highly processed food, desire for bigger houses, more and bigger cars, higher levels of debt, and lifestyles devoted to the

accumulation of non-essential goods”). And the disturbing fact is that this number grows.

What for years was considered a pain of the Western countries is now spreading in the third world – half of global consumers live in developing countries, including 240 million in China and 120 million in India – and they are markets with the most potential for expansion (Mayell). Christopher Flavin, president of Worldwatch Institute said in a statement to the press, that “ Rising consumption has helped meet basic needs and create jobs but as we enter a new century, this unprecedented consumer appetite is undermining the natural systems we all depend on, and making it even harder for the world’s poor to meet their basic needs”.

China is a great example of changing realities. Only 25 years ago there were almost no private cars and cities were crowded with bicycles. By 2000, 5 million cars moved people and goods; the number was expected to reach 24 million by the end of 2005 year. In the US, there are more cars on the roads than licensed drivers (“ Ideas and shared solutions for sustainable & low cost green living” ). Some argue that consumerism cannot delete or destroy society. Many believe that consumerism will benefit the economy. As we see, it will indeed keep the game going but let’s look at what cost.

The spending on imports results in a need to compensate export earnings. This need generates eagerness to embrace potential export markets with no regards to what the human rights or environmental records of these countries may be. Sweatshops with ridiculous wages and horrible working conditions with huge injury rates, uncontrolled air, water and soil pollution –

these are the costs of consumerism. Consumerism appears to be very sick in terms of human rights. An average Nicaraguan peasant sells a hundred pound bag of coffee beans for \$2. Now let's think how much coffee can we buy for \$2?

Those people eat 2 times a day – mostly corn bread and sometimes coffee made of spoiled beans that can't be sold. Where do the money go you may ask? To the transnational company's chief financial officer, who is in an urgent need of a new yacht. And it's not only in the third world. The more consumerism spreads, the weaker is the incentive to manufacture long-lasting, quality products, and the more it is likely that cheaply made products will instead be imported from the lowest-wage, environmentally unregulated overseas manufacturer that mobile capital, ever seeking the highest return, can find.

In the US, The nationwide loss of manufacturing jobs leads to a corresponding growth in unemployment and the number of welfare recipients, less personal wealth, a shrinking tax base, fewer public services, and greater public and private debt, hopelessness for job seekers and a growing negative balance of trade. Americans can't afford to buy the house next door but guess who has lots of dollars to spend here because of the money that we're exporting to buy their cheap junk.?

By facilitating the sale of whatever is advertised and sold, without examination by the purchaser of quality, origin, environmental degradation or traditions of manufacture, Consumerism fuels the destruction of the productive economy (verdant. net) Consumers' rights impinge on the rights

of other humans living in the Global Community. The right to choice is the consumer right that refers to the right to have a range and variety of goods and services at competitive, fair prices and variable, satisfactory quality.

In order to assure choice in the developed country markets, governments have implemented trade laws to facilitate cross border transactions and transnational corporations (TNCs) have set up business off shore so they can lessen the cost of the production process. The goods that are available in the developed country markets are provided by slave labor, child labor, sweatshops or in countries that allow the TNCs to forego adhering to pollution or ecological concerns and human rights in pursuit of profit. Labor rights are abused in efforts to earn more profits. This leads to abhorrent working conditions, job insecurity and low living standards (all human rights). Consumers in developed countries have been socialized to want more and more things to consume but have not been socialized to appreciate the impact of their consumption choices on the human rights of other people; that is, they are not being responsible for their decisions” (“ Ideas and shared solutions for sustainable & low cost green living” ). So what is the solution? Can we do anything to change the consumerist society? Yes, we can and more than that – we have to.

What the anti-consumerists propose is – to own less and to enjoy what you own more. Basically, many things we buy we don’t need. As it goes in an anonymous quote “ We buy things we don’t need to impress people we don’t know”. And therefore, thoughtful consuming will finally get us to the point of rational usage of natural resources. In order to change, we will have to get rid of a throw-away mentality. “ Reduce, reuse, recycle” is a simple anti-



consumerist mantra. And it does work, even if you think that you alone will hardly make any difference.