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### **History and Politics of Overconsumption**

Modern consumer societies are a grave danger to all life on the earth. Increasing consumption is threatening to generate a global catastrophe of unparalleled dimensions through climate change. The threat is accelerated by the spread of consumer life style among middle classes in the newly industrialised countries.

Technical fixes of one or other detrimental character of consumption do not change the general pattern. Often they just move one out of the frying pan into the fire.

A common reaction to this quandary is to accuse consumers as individuals. For some this lead to ecological consumption. But those who make this more than a cosmetic gesture are a small minority. For most people accusations result on just a bad conscience and no real action.

This deadlock has created despair in many people who see the precariousness of our ecological situation. When they see no prospect in the change of human behaviour, they want instead change the physical characteristics of the planet Earth. Some panicked scientist plan risky geoengineering projects to avert the approaching climate catastrophe.

However, before embarking on these dangerous endeavours, it may be wise to enquire why people in the North – and in the islands of North inside the South – are consuming so much.

The standard – usually implicit – answer is that consumption makes people's life better. Yet a great number of surveys and studies show that this is not the case. After certain, rather low, threshold consuming more does not make people more satisfied or happier. For example, when asked in the beginning of 1990's, whether people are happy, over 90% of the Indonesians, the Philippino, the Malaysians and the Hong Kongians answered affirmatively, but only 64% of the rich Japanese regarded themselves as happy. In the USA people were happier in 1950 than in 1990 although the GNP per capita doubled in that period.

Why then consumption is increasing if it does not bring any improvement in life? A short historical survey may help to find an answer.

What was the life like when everyone was consuming modestly? Thomas Hobbes gave his well-known answer in 1651: “the life of man [was] solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short”. Other versions of the same abound in history and in the present day. But even Hobbes' contemporaries had other answers. For example William Shakespeare in his play *The Tempest* sees “savages” in rather favourable light. The first contacts with people outside civilization created a great number of stories about Noble Savages: people living admirable life with low consumption. In fact modern anthropological research has found a lot of cases of “primitive” societies living satisfying life. Marshall Sahlins writes about the original affluent society where people work/worked much less than in modern societies but do/did not suffer hunger or any other deprivation.

How was life organized in such societies? Necessary work to get food and shelter was not only material activity but at the same time cultural and spiritual work to forge relations to other people and life forms. This cultural and spiritual activity continued during the “free time” and even in sleep. The distribution of “products” was organized as gifts but even that had simultaneously cultural and spiritual dimensions creating relation among groups of people and between people and nature.

These cultural models or remnants of them posed a great obstacle for colonists and developers. They could not get people to work in their projects with any promises. Regularly they

had to resort to forced labour or slavery. Even as late as in 1963 development expert Lucian Pye wrote: `It is no longer possible to assume that people in traditional societies will readily experience a revolution of rising expectations simply by being exposed to the prospect of new standards of material life ... Instead of having to cope with an agitated population carried away with exaggerated expectations, most governments in transitional societies are confronted with the problem of a disturbingly apathetic public which is inured to all appeals for action.'<sup>1</sup>

How then consumer society and “rising expectations” were created in the first place? The beginning stage in the historical development was formation of domination, social hierarchies and the state. This was a difficult task because those to be subdued resisted strongly<sup>2</sup>. It was essential to show that the king and other elite members are different – even godlike. Myths were produced and bodies were mutilated. But the most important method to prove the difference was conspicuous consumption. The items included jewels, precious metals, rare skins (e.g. sable) and strange food (e.g. tongues of nightingale). First capitalists provided for this purpose by importing rare things from far away regions<sup>3</sup>.

When capitalists got stronger they started little by little supply also the masses with certain items. One of the first mass consumed product was silver coins. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century the Chinese government forced all people to pay their taxes in money. Therefore the demand of silver increased enormously. The metal was imported by European traders from horrible mines opened in America.

In Europe the first mass consumed capitalistic product was tobacco. In England of 1669 its consumption reached 0.93 pounds per capita and every fourth adult was using it. In 1690's sugar was consumed widely: in England 4 pounds per capita. Much of it was taken as rum. Tea was drunk on mass scale in England already in 1730's.

These economic achievements meant no improvement in the life of ordinary people. The items were consumed only because traders worked like drug traffickers addicting people to their products.

At a later stage capitalists provided masses with clothes, food and household utensils. This was possible only by destroying small scale farming and handicrafts as livelihoods and transforming people to industrial workers who could produce hardly anything themselves. This change, too, was forced upon people and meant no improvement. Industrial products were of poorer quality than earlier handiworks. Work did not give any satisfaction but was mere drudgery. The quality of human community was deteriorated and ecological relations were destroyed. Mass unemployment and hunger were created in areas to be industrialised later (first e.g. in Germany).

At the same time the circles of elite were extended and their consumption and power increased. This created enormous tensions in society. Popular education and workers movements poured oil on the flames.

In this situation new elite strategies and ways of governing were needed. In the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century two of them were invented: propaganda machinery and consumer society.

The modern disinformation society had two starting points: Astounding good results of the war propaganda during the First World War and the discovery of psychoanalysis and human subconsciousness. The key figure in developing propaganda machinery was Sigmund Freud's nephew Edward Bernays. He began to apply uncle Sigmund's theory systematically to commercial and political propaganda and invented a nicer term for it: “public relations” or PR.

One of Bernays' first customers was the American Tobacco Company. Its problem was that men's tobacco demand had saturated a long time ago while very few women were smoking. Bernays

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1 *Communications and Political Development* (cited in C Douglas Lummis: Development as forced labour, *New Internationalist*, June, 2000)

2 See e.g. about the history of state formation in Africa in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century in Sigrist, Christian (1994): *Regulierte Anarchie, Untersuchung zum Fehlen und zur Entstehung politischer Herrschaft in segmentären Gesellschaften Afrikas*. Europäische Verlagsanstalt, Hamburg

3 See for example Wallerstein, Immanuel (1983): *Historical Capitalism*. Verso, London and Fernand Braudel: "La dynamique du capitalisme".

organized a group of young models to march in the New York City suffragette parade. He informed the press that a group of women's rights marchers would light "Torches of Freedom". On a previously agreed upon sign, the models lit Lucky Strike cigarettes in front of the press photographers. On 1<sup>st</sup> of April 1928 The New York Times wrote: "Group of Girls Puff at Cigarettes as a Gesture of 'Freedom'".

However, for Bernays PR was not only marketing tool but also a political weapon. As a member of North American upper class, he identified strongly with the fears of European and American elites: after the 1<sup>st</sup> World War, widening franchise and social movements threatened to diminish the power and privileges of the top. As they themselves put it: the problem was how "to take the risk out of democracy". For Bernays the solution was the new propaganda technique. In his book *Propaganda* (1928) he writes: "The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society. Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country".

PR-techniques were used successfully to manipulate political elections and they became part and parcel of "normal democracy". But propaganda functioning on subconscious level had an even more important political effect. By creating mass demand of luxury items it diverted people's energies from risky political and collective activities to harmless individual aspirations.

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century motor car was the most important of these political consuming objects. In Europe mass motorization was started by Nazis. Once in power they suppressed all genuine collective action of industrial workers. But existing workers' quarters in Berlin and other big cities were a big worry for them: the informal communities inside them could regenerate the movement. It was impossible to detonate them all and workers could not be gassed. Yet the Nazis invented an *Endlösung* for this problem: it was a new political technology called people's car or *Volks Wagen*.

Hitler met the French car industrialist Renault in 1935. He explained why Nazis backed the people's car so strongly. After the rearmament boom, workers were going to create troubles again. But Volkswagen will make the organizing more difficult. The "cheaper vehicle" was supposed to help to "diffuse the industrial labour force by transferring them from the factory location to the country". In 1938, Hitler laid the foundation stone for the Volkswagen factory near Braunschweig.

Later during last century consumer society was refined in North America. To complete the automobilization, General Motors, Standard Oil of California and Firestone decimated the mass transit systems of American cities in the 1930's – 1950's: they bought traffic companies just to close down tram and bus lines. During the Great Depression General Electric and other companies invented planned obsolescence: the pauperised people who had all but stopped to consume were forced to buy new commodities because life time of products were consciously shorted<sup>4</sup>. Shopping centres and supermarkets were invented and patented for boosting consumption: daily consumption items were put in the far end of the premise so that the customer would make many impulse buys. Cities were re-planned to accommodate enormous flows of cars. The weakened community life was given a deathblow by television which opened out new vistas for commercial and political manipulation.

After the Second World War this new "American Way of Life" was made into a patriotic calling that was to be preached all over the world. Because cultural imperialism, political reasons for the creation of consumer society got obscured. Sociologists and philosophers started to cook up apolitical modernisation theories which made the political project appear to be natural evolution.

How then does a mature consumer society function nowadays? Although economic theory postulates humans as material beings, marketing – taught in another corner of institutes of economics – regards people as social and spiritual beings. In advertisement commodities are made into symbols of most varied things: strength, beauty, artistry, skilfulness, trustfulness, intelligence,

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4 Slade, Giles (2006): *Made to Break: Technology and Obsolescence in America*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts

social success, masculinity, femininity, sex, naturalness, nature experiences, a social group, dominance. Commodities are bought because of their social, cultural and spiritual meanings and connotations. But usually they do not satisfy social, cultural and spiritual needs. As far as they do satisfy, they do it only for a short while: Soon meanings are moved by advertisements from old things to new ones. Yet you cannot buy the new ones at once – or perhaps ever. The consequence is frustration and dissatisfaction. Already in 1920s Charles Kettering of General Motors stated: "The key to economic prosperity is organized creation of dissatisfaction."

Meanings are manipulated also on a wider cultural arena in commercial media. Leaders and public figures are made into idols of certain consumer lifestyles. Living according to the models is possible only for a few. The results include eating disorders and the depression epidemic.

But even more dangerous than the health effects are the political consequences. The media manipulation creates an illusion that the official economic and political system will satisfy all the desires: you just have to wait patiently. Don't worry if you do not participate in decision making: the economy will produce the things all want. Consumer choices seem to be the essential arena for democracy. Communal and social goals are replaced by individual goals. The result is that social movements are a phenomena concerning only young people whose socialization is unfinished. Thus when a social or political need shows up, ordinary women and men do not have the strength to struggle against power holders.

Accordingly the consumer society is a power project that has nothing to do with well being or happiness. Good life lies beyond consumerism. In many ways this is obvious but to see it is difficult because of a thick cloud of lies. It seems that for many people an earthquake is needed to open up the vision. May be the first steps of approaching climate catastrophe provides them with the needed tremble.