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BUILDING A SUSTAINABLE SOCIETY: THE NECESSITY TO CHANGE THE TERM 'CONSUMER'

Sabrina Chakori, MA

Abstract

The profit-seeking system leads to many negative environmental impacts. Within this economic system, consumption reflects an important relationship between humans and nature. However, despite the growing international attention to environmental sustainability, our society does not necessarily acknowledge consumerism as the cause of global environmental degradation. Deconstructing the consumption culture and redefining what determines well-being, this paper will attempt to provide a comprehensive overview of the existing definition of people in the economic system. Many authors have defined our role in the economy; however, in terms of *customer*, *citizen-consumer*, and *socially conscious consumer*, most of the literature in this domain remains rooted in consumerism. Consumerism cannot be fixed with further consumerism; therefore this paper discusses the importance of reclaiming our identity and the need to define new terms for people in a new economic system. Any new terms should integrate interests and responsibilities that go beyond simple utility maximization. Moving beyond the term “consumer” will change our worldview. This cultural transformation may help facilitate long-term environmental sustainability.

Keywords: Consumption culture; consumers; sustainability; partnership; domination; behavior; well-being; sustainable development; cultural transformation; environment; climate change; economics; redefinition

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INTRODUCTION

Consumption is an important relationship between humans and nature. However, in the current growth-driven system it is uncommon, especially on political agendas or in the media, to relate environmental degradation to the effects of the over-consumption culture. Pollutants, greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, land use, water consumption, and waste contamination are all environmental impacts associated with consumption (Ivanova et al., 2016).

The focus of this paper is the importance of relating households' consumption to environmental impact. Too often, environmental sustainability is set as a goal in parallel with infinite economic growth, in which consumption is the primary engine. This brings attention to an important question: Can we attain a socially and environmentally sustainable society without changing the consumption culture? As Robbins (2005) wrote, one reason why society does not point out consumption as an environmental problem is that the only solution would be a massive cultural overhaul, which might also incur severe economic dislocation (pp. 209-210).

The reasons for our consumption addiction can be found in history. For example, in the U.S.A, after World War II, people were encouraged to consume in order to grow the welfare of their nation (Cohen, 2004). This objective has thus permeated everybody's lives, becoming a "patriotic duty" (McShane & Sabadoz, 2015). Consumption has been translated as responsible citizenship (Cohen, 2004). Nowadays, despite the environmental crisis we are facing, the over-consumption culture has become not only a tool to ensure future prosperity, but also a means to exhibit our social status (Cho, Keum, & Shah, 2015).

In the current profit-seeking system, individuals are conceptualized as economic entities, whose interests equate with maximizing economic utility, rather than as people with ethical, socio-cultural, and economic interests (Devinney, Auger, Eckhardt, & Birtchnell, 2006). But in a sustainable society people cannot be defined just as consumers, as cogs of the economic growth machine (Chakori, 2017). The term itself, *consumer*, is inimical to a prosperous society, that includes environmental sustainability. The challenge of this century is to reconceptualise our role in the economy, which requires finding a new term to define people in the next system. Finding a new term is beyond the scope of this paper. Rather, I will look at issues surrounding the difficulties of defining humans in the economy and discuss the benefits of doing so within the larger debate, including interests and responsibilities that go beyond utility maximization.

THE CONSUMPTION CULTURE AND THE DOMINATION OF THE ENVIRONMENT

Dominance characterized by hierarchical, top-down structures creates a high degree of tension. We live in a world of many discrepancies - East vs West, developed vs developing countries, as Eisler (2005) highlights - and the current system nourishes those gaps even more. Analysing Western cultural evolution in relation to the domination tensions between women and men, Eisler (1994) explains how a dominator model of social and ideological organisation is not sustainable. The domination ethos, such as in the economy, has fundamental implications, especially in relation to our exploitation of natural resources.

Globalization, intended as an establishment of the global market free from socio-political control (Al-Rodhan & Stoudmann, 2006), reinforces the domination character of our society. Beyond the union of the markets, globalization increased the consumption culture exponentially. However, while the trade of goods and services globally increased, the awareness and knowledge of the resources required in the supply chain did not increase in parallel to our consumption addiction. The consumption culture, advanced by tools such as marketing, leads us, for example, to buy a new smartphone every year, going beyond consuming what we really need. Consumers are motivated by the desire for status in hierarchical social relationship. This is the concept of status consumption: people seek to buy and consume products that are seen to confer status (Eastman, Goldsmith, & Flynn, 1999). Marketers of many brands of visibly consumed products, such as clothing, cars, and cosmetics, know that they are selling status symbols (Eastman et al. 1999).

The consumption culture ignores the environmental and social consequences of such anthropocentric dominant behaviour. This hungry system does not take into account the ecological limits of our planet. Indeed, in the traditional domination model, caring for our environment is not a priority (Eisler, 2005). Nevertheless, the impact of globalization is vast. Literature showing the negative externalities of the global market is ample. For example, our consumption is responsible for up to 60 percent of GHG emissions and 50 to 80 percent of total resource use (land, material, and water) (Ivanova et al., 2016).

The literature abounds with examples of environmental impacts caused by our current economic system, yet rarely is the environmental degradation explained or linked to our consumption patterns, especially in the media or the political agenda. On one side, governments claim proudly their sustainability goals, expressed through environmental agreements; however, on the other side they aim for competitive (infinite) growth. Article 10.5 of the Paris Climate Agreement states, “Accelerating, encouraging and enabling innovation is critical for an effective, long-term global response to climate change and promoting economic growth and sustainable development” (p.15).

Environmental sustainability, nowadays often under the spotlights, is not compatible with the current system, in which there is the assumption that we are considered and called consumers. This ideological organisation that aims for unlimited economic growth of our economy is not sustainable.

As a new way to look at our present and future, the next section explores the need to change the term *consumer* as a first step toward a more prosperous society.

In order to build a prosperous and sustainable society, we need systemic change that takes into account that the economy must operate within nature’s limits. The economic system must serve (not dominate) society. Shifting toward a partnership model in our economic system means taking into account the welfare of our ecosystems. Living in partnership with and within ecosystems regeneration allows prosperity. Our (consumption) actions could be situated within the ecological caps of this planet in many different ways. Permaculture practices instead of intensive monoculture crops, and decentralized renewable energy systems (Fioramonti, 2016) instead of centralized fossil fuel-based processes are example of schemes that would allow the regeneration of natural cycles and a democratization of societies. Industrial ecology within a circular economy, instead of the current ‘make, use, and dispose’ linear economy, is another illustration of how we could live in a different system. In order to make a transition, two important aspects of the partnership model that Eisler (2005) expresses are empowering people, and linking rather than

ranking. I therefore emphasize the importance of a transition toward partnership structures.

BEYOND THE TERM ‘CONSUMER’

It is important to reconceptualise our role in the economy. Despite a lengthy history of debate, there is a lack of any alternative definition of *consumers*. Most of the literature is limited to the term *citizen-consumer*, which still leaves us anchored in the consumer culture (Chakori, 2017). Kessler and Bach (2011) advance the term “end-user” (p. 1), in other words the final receiver of a product or service. In the decade between 1980 and 1990 “end-user” evolved into the term “customer” with “sovereignty” (Kessler & Bach, 2011). *Customer sovereignty* as an enchanting myth is viewed by Korczynski (2002) and Ott (2004) as an illusion, in which it is believed that people remain protected, despite operational systems that manipulate the customer. It could be argued that the term *customer sovereignty* is still imprisoned in the assumption that our role is simply linked to market outputs that lead to economic growth. *People sovereignty* could be an option to replace it, even though this term is still rooted in the paradigm in which humans dominate the planet, abusing the resources available.

In the last decade the term *citizen-consumer* gained importance (Clarke, Newman, Smith, Vidler, & Westmarland, 2007; Denhardt & Denhardt, 2000; Kessler & Bach, 2011). One likely reason was to raise public policy concern to ensure that the private, individual, and self-centred behaviours associated with *customer* were moderated by sensitivity to shared community interests (Kessler & Bach, 2011). However, as Berglund & Matti (2006) rightly ask, are we either consumer or citizen? Can we be both? The *citizen-consumer* is still rooted to the notion of the *customer*, although with a *social conscience* (Kessler & Bach, 2011). Much of the current debate revolves around the relationship between the consumer and the civic role we have in society (Cho et al., 2015).

The foregoing discussion implies that the term *citizen-consumer* may not be an improvement over *consumer*, as it still considers just the private, individual, self-

centred aspect (Kessler & Bach, 2011). From my point of view, the words *citizen* and *consumer* contrast with each other, instead of being complementary. In fact, the term consumers, according to traditional economists, represents “individuals guided primarily by individualistic and materialistic concerns, who respond to economic incentives and make rational choices determined by their personal preferences and the (predominately economic) constraints they face” (Berglund & Matti, 2006). In opposition to the individual economic short-term gains, the term citizen includes a separate set of values held by people, whose decisions are also motivated by altruistic and ethical concerns for the community (Berglund & Matti, 2006). As Sagoff (2008) pointed out, acting as a citizen is imperative to reach a long-term sustainable society based on successful environmental policies. Another tension in the term *citizen-consumer* concerns the imbalance between the first word, more grounded on a partnership model, and the second, which remains impregnated by a domination culture.

CONSUMER EMPOWERMENT/CONSCIOUSNESS

While some scholars propose new terms such as the ones presented in previous paragraphs, another section of the literature, presenting the neoliberal economic view, focuses on the term *consumer empowerment*. Different degrees of consumer power can arise in everyday consumers' lives (Rucker, Galinsky, & Dubois, 2012). McShane and Sabadoz (2015) discuss that a consumer free from the constraints associated with corporate profit-seeking ideology, and free to integrate citizenship responsibilities in the marketplace, could be considered a reconceptualization of consumer empowerment. For Adkins and Ozanne (2005), consumer empowerment corresponds to the ability to exert power and influence the market. However, even if these explanations emphasize our market power, and the correlated responsibility, what lies behind this empowerment? Does this power lead to more conscious consumption?

Some scholars believe that consumerism is not always in conflict with civic culture (Bennett, 2004) and that *socially conscious consumption* has emerged and replaced traditional forms of civic engagement (Cho et al., 2015). The risk in *conscious*

consumerism is that people are satisfied by voting with their wallet for ‘ethical’ or ‘green’ products, without questioning either the quantity or the real need to purchase. Moreover, there is a rapidly growing literature indicates that nourishing the consumption culture, socially conscious or not, has not only contributed to, but has also accelerated, the decline of civic life, leading to a move away from community commitment (Cho et al., 2015). There has been a shift from the collectivist idea of citizenship to the individualised practice of the consumer (Axford & Seddon, 2006). Therefore, this *conscious consumerism* stagnates far from a partnership model that could build resilient neighbourhoods which do not require the constant purchase of new goods. In a sharing economy, collaborative communities could share goods and skills, and reuse and recycle instead of purchasing brand new goods. In this way, we would go beyond the ‘make, use and dispose’ system, and exploit fewer resources. A partnership network could give access to local resources, decreasing pollution from long-distance transportation, and avoiding many environmental and social impacts created by the global market.

Another risk in speaking of ‘ethical’ consumption is that citizens are transformed even more into consumers, and political action (if it happens) is reduced to shopping (Chakori, 2017). Even conscious consumption (used as political action) can be illusory, due to the size of corporations, which can produce more and more goods and services labelled ‘ethical’, along with what are actually ‘unethical’ products (Mayes, 2016). In addition, even if households have a relatively large degree of control over their consumption, they often lack accurate and actionable information on how to improve their own environmental performance (Gardner & Stern, 2008)

Conscious consumption is still framed in an economic system that operates in a voracious, and therefore unsustainable, way. Both production and consumption seem to suggest that losses from natural capital can be easily replaced, regenerated, or fixed technologically. This is not the case. Even if consumer consciousness is growing, consumption keeps increasing our ecological footprint. We reach the Overshoot Day (or Ecological Debt Day) earlier and earlier each year. This day measures the point of the year at which the consumption of resources exceeds the ability of the planet to replace them; currently we use the resources of 1.6 planets,

and the trend keeps rising (Earth Overshoot Day, 2017). Moreover, although the potential of technological change can be substantial, there are physical constraints defined by the Laws of Thermodynamics that cannot be circumvented (Ekins, 1993). As Ekins (1993) explains clearly, entropy on Earth can only be decreased by importing low-entropy resources, such as solar energy, from outside it. Even so, the problem is not just the type of energy we use, it is what we do with it. It is therefore essential to remember that the cleanest energy is the energy we do not use. I share the opinion of Jason Hickel (2016), who pointed out that many climate movements make enormous mistakes in focusing all their attention on topics such as fossil fuels instead of working on something deeper: the basic logic of our economic operating system.

Consumption, conscious or not, has many environmental and social externalities. People in the current economic system are still defined just as consumers who, through their shopping actions, support infinite economic growth. The fact that we continue to use the word *consumer* makes it difficult to remove consumption-oriented ideology from society. Therefore, in order to build a more prosperous society, we need to deconstruct the consumption culture and to advance an alternate definition of the concept of people that goes beyond the profit-seeking economic framework and beyond the culture of surplus. Redefining our role, using a new term that replaces consumer, is important because it reshapes our worldview. One word can have many physical responses, influencing not only our worldview but especially our behaviour (Pulvermüller, 2002).

CONCLUSION

An essential starting point that can help us move toward deep rather than surface changes is to rethink the concept of well-being, going beyond the narrow definition of economic growth as a final goal in itself. Fulfilling lives cannot be achieved through over-consumption. Indeed, industrial output can easily endanger human well-being, leading to the deterioration of social relationships and environmental balance on which well-being depends (Fioramonti, 2016). The development of people's collective well-being should be pursued through new channels or dimensions. Identifying these dimensions can help us to replace consumers as the

central actors in the economy with a notion of people or *caring citizens* that is more compatible with long-term sustainable societies.

In the destructive model of growth-driven development, consumers play a fundamental role. Globalization strengthened a domination system that does not fully include the social and environmental costs of the market.

Pockets of partnerships projects are mushrooming around the world, demonstrating that different lifestyles can exist. Reducing, reusing, recycling, repairing, and sharing instead of buying would lead us to become *caring citizens*. The economy needs to be restructured, and our role in it redesigned.

Unfortunately, from the word *customers*, *citizen-consumer*, and *socially conscious consumer*, most of the literature in this domain is still rooted in the consumption culture. This paper acknowledges the importance of being conscious consumers but highlights that consumerism cannot be fixed with other consumerism (Chakori 2017). Our challenge is to go beyond the simple intersection of the consumer culture and the citizen role. A new term is needed that is capable of integrating the key dimension of human and ecological well-being.

More research and political attention should be given to redefining the role of people in the next economic system. However, we do not need to wait for a new theoretical jargon in order to seek a different behaviour more compatible with the ecological limits of this planet.

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