

# The Lifestyle Discourse in Consumer Capitalism

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## ABSTRACT

This paper presents some dimensions of the lifestyle discourse which have become relevant in recent years in science and public. The discourse that had initially focused on the limits of growth increasingly showed the destructive consequences of the materialistic consumer way of life and discussed sustainable lifestyles. The commodification and infantilization of the consumers who are involved in the commodity structure of consumerist lifestyle have been criticized. For some time an increasing emphasis is found for problems that extend beyond one's own life. With increasing empathy the personal lifestyle is widely based on relationships and contexts outside the immediate sphere of life. Accordingly, a lifestyle of voluntary simplicity is propagated. The consistent post-materialistic orientation, which means a renunciation of the consumer capitalism, is regarded as its central feature.

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## Dimensions of the lifestyle discourse

With the increasing differentiation of society and the processes of individualization and pluralisation, new social concepts have emerged, that have been designated with different names such as consumer society, risk society, event society, hedonistic society, etc. You may return this inflation of the terms to the fact that originally used concepts such as capitalist society and class society were no longer evident, since significant changes in the social structure had revealed. This is shown by André Gorz, who in *Farewell*

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to the Working Class (1982) and in *Reclaiming Work* (1999) indicated that the work model – the level of qualification of the work force – had changed. The line of development from the agrarian society, through the industrial society and the service society, to the knowledge-based society clearly showed that, in the rich industrialized countries, in the classical sense there was no working class which could be further described with the old concepts. Nevertheless, social inequalities have not disappeared, but they have been levelled in mass consumption and veiled. Therefore, the idea of social classes was generally not simply abandoned, but the persisting social differences have been worked on. Discussing the ‘subtle differences’ in *Distinction* (1984), Pierre Bourdieu focussed on conflicting social interests and thus implicitly rejected the model focusing on material prosperity. In the recent past Robert Castel (2002) and others continue to work on issues such as class, work, social security and precariousness.

The old and new approaches that are oriented towards classes and class interests investigate the mechanisms of power, respond to the exploitation and alienation, and, in the context of neo-liberal principles and the general commodification of living conditions, make the social life situation the theme. These approaches are the closest to the structural conditions that generate social inequalities. They contribute to the lifestyle discourse only to a limited extent, since the way of life is considered to be a *consequence* of the social inequality. The discourse on class, precariousness and poverty fades out the phenomenon of overconsumption as rather casual, although it remains subliminally in the ‘subtle differences’ and in the forming ‘habitus’. The habitus with its constituent structures and experiences limits the subjectivity of social actors. They remain in their actions and possibilities subordinated to the context, in which they were socialized. From this structural approach, a general human interest in overcoming consumer capitalism, e.g. in a lifestyle of voluntary simplicity, cannot be derived. Moreover, such an interest is doubted ideologically, because it does not question the existing power interests and omits the conditions that produce social inequality. These approaches contribute to the

lifestyle discourse with the following: (a) not to overlook the forms of inequality and the mechanisms of their generation, (b) to consider the subjectivity of the actors as class-specific and socially determined, and (c) to ask to what extent the lifestyle discourse which is conducted in the context of sustainability fits to interests that want to prevent a profound change in the power structures of societies and on a global scale.

These objections are not to be dismissed out of hand, but thought about as a corrective approach in the lifestyle discourse. Nevertheless, the author believes that the lifestyle discourse cannot be performed without the critique of consumerism and without the consideration of alternative lifestyles, because the analysis of capitalism would otherwise remain incomplete. The additions to this critical approach are given with the material prosperity and sustainability. Both levels play a central role in the current discussion and are connected with a critique of economism. The shift from the 'society of producers' to the 'society of consumers' (Bauman 2009: 31) describes the changes occurred in the economic base of society, particularly the expansion of mass production, which has made the consumption activities the predominant mechanism for integration, in comparison to which work has become secondary. People who drop out of the regular wage labour and are therefore limited in their consumption possibilities are 'kept small' and controlled by their limiting living conditions. In addition, 'superstructure phenomena' such as the ideology of the good life in abundance control consciousness and allow compensatory satisfaction of needs. On this basis, people are able to meet the imperatives of mass production, which lie in the fact that the products are popular, accepted and used or destroyed so that mass production does not come to a halt. This view of the lifestyles - associated with the consumer capitalism that sees consuming as the first social duty - focuses on socially integrating the members of the consumer societies by means of mass consumption. This way also Zygmunt Bauman talks about a wide group of socially integrated consumers, which are confronted, however, with an *underclass* which is widely excluded from consumption and has precarious life conditions. This

*underclass* fits well in the more intense economism, which excludes people from society because of poverty and declares them to be the ones to blame for their bitterness.

Therefore the lifestyle discourse must consider the fact that one can find in the consumer society not only material prosperity but also poverty and precariousness, so that we can speak about 'poverty in abundance'. In the lifestyles it is important to evaluate the level and composition of poverty and social exclusion with regard to their duration and persistence, since they tend to grow in time. Therefore one must not only question how over-consumption can be limited, but also how poverty can be combated. Most of the times the lifestyle discourse considers only the turning away from a consumerist lifestyle to a sustainable way of life, but not the manner in which the transition from a poverty lifestyle to a lifestyle of sustainability can be carried out successfully.

The emerging world society has become more and more narrow as a result of the emergence of new media for communication, which induced Marshall McLuhan to speak about the *Global Village* early in the 1960s (see McLuhan 1964). Even if the substantive meaning of this concept has been changed by the *World Wide Web*, this term still refers to the interconnection of economies, to the interconnection between globally acting companies and the growing political interdependencies at global level. In this case also political and other actors in the context of sustainability must be mentioned who are related to the *Agenda 21* and the corresponding local agendas as well as to the climate change conferences. The issues concerning sustainability and sustainable development do not question only the global situation with the raw materials that get exhausted and the unresolved follow-up problems, but also the equitable distribution at global level. Also in this case the discussion of lifestyles includes questions of precariousness, poverty and exploitation of people in less productive economies, but also the search for a solution regarding an equitable distribution of both goods and access to all social resources meant to fulfil people's needs. The question regarding the equitable distribution must be asked at a cross-regional level

and over long periods of time as well.

Today, social and economic developments can be understood and evaluated at a global level only. The social change has been visible since the middle of the 20th century with the shift from industrial capitalism to consumer capitalism, which favoured the expansion of consumption markets for the expanding mass production. The material prosperity, which seemed to be impressive at first sight, was associated with a shift of the perspective from class to social milieu, from work to consumption and from production relations to mass culture and the culture industry.

It was believed that the poverty after the World War II was a result of the war events. The bitterness of the years after the war was to be replaced by a growing material prosperity, and the existent poverty was to be combated through social control instances, like social work. Neoliberal concepts of a material prosperity were created, that guaranteed consumption chances for all population groups within a levelled consumer society. In the background there was also the concept of a society associated with achievement expectations, as an addition to the mass consumption. This achieving society declared and legitimized existent differences in the performance of consumers, provided that everyone who wants to participate in the material prosperity by consumption contributes to the society's performance through work and income in order to obtain the right to consume. Differences in purchasing power were ideologically attributed to differences in the ability and readiness to accomplish something.

In the last two decades, the lifestyle discourse changed because of the global crisis and has been strongly referring to the risks of global collapse, to the visible faulty attitude towards resources and their use, respectively destruction. The discourse focuses especially on the global consequences associated with the consumerist lifestyle of the Western countries. Neoliberal economy concepts and an unstoppable economism have extended to all social fields and have determined more and more the global situation.

A worldwide dialog has started about the bases and the results of the

industrial and consumer capitalist ways of life. The question is under which conditions a life is possible in a way not overstressing the material prosperity, a life for people on all continents in social equality and without poverty and exclusion.

In the western societies new lifestyles arose, that are to understand as answers to changed conditions of life and future prospects. The lifestyle actually has to be mentioned here is orientated to 'health and sustainability', but it does not question the dynamics of the consumer capitalism. So it is criticized as a variant of consumerism which is only a little more cultivated than the average consumer behaviour. As an alternative, the lifestyle of voluntary simplicity is frequently mentioned. It is insinuated, however, that it strives for asceticism and renunciation. All new lifestyles are aware that it is incorrect to believe investments and growth of the markets are a guarantee of prosperity and life quality. The consumer capitalism as a basis of the lifestyle is declined.

Critics agree that the present economy can be called capitalistic. Different accents however show that this agreement is only superficial. Without expecting completeness, and only listed here, the following terms are common: Neoliberal capitalism, finance capitalism, natural capitalism, industrial capitalism, economism and consumer capitalism.

The restrictive capitalism concept that refers to the economic system focuses on the production mode with the material and human productive forces, the work organization with work assignment, the amount and the use of capital, the production process, the consequences of the technological development with rationalization and automation, the remuneration systems and, finally, processes of exploitation and alienation. This variability in the theme of capitalism underlines the work process in which material values are created. This approach is preferred to resume society rather as a work society than a consumer society. In accordance, the social analysis is carried out by criteria of power, class-specific interests, exploitation, impoverishment and alienation. It refers to the economic base and social being rather than to the awareness processes and ideologies.

The expansive capitalism concept is related to the whole life form - not only to the economy - and extends the spectrum of the relevant phenomena. It looks at the social reality also from the perspective of the subjects and examines the processes of the subject formation which take place on the basis of the mass culture and cultural industry by education and socialization, by advertising and the mediation of esthetic styles. The interest in social milieus and lifestyles shows that the capitalism is not restricted to socioeconomic, technological, political and legal conditions but is judged to be a totality of the human life in society. With the use of the consumer capitalism concept is stated that 'consuming' has got synonymous for 'life'. This view is shared among others by Benjamin R. Barber and Zygmunt Bauman. Behind the consumerism often stands the concept of consumer capitalism.

Dealing with the excessive longing for material consumption will be the core for radical social criticism. The consumerism is connected to identifiable and expansive consequences, which question it and will replace it as a basic social structure. Although the more acute growing situation has been known for several decades, the undertaken efforts are not enough to improve the global situation. Faced with a deteriorating situation for several decades, the efforts that have been made are by no means sufficient to pacify the global situation. Neither the ability to survive nor the moral and political justification of the global claim to leadership on the supposed superiority of Western civilization over other civilizations can be assigned.

In the Western civilization and, in the meanwhile, all over the world, the consumerism is generalized as a life form. Those who are growing up in this life form, consider it natural and harmless. The members of this society have no choice than to buy their existence as consumers on the market. The destructive consequences of this 'over-consumption' do not only affect the environment and the nature, but the people themselves, in the rich societies as well as in the poor on all continents, also the fellow creatures in the world of animals and plants. In the everyday consumption these consequences are mostly ignored. The majority of the consumers can hardly imagine an

alternative to this over-consumption, because doing without is seen as an attack to our material prosperity and identity. Thus the ideal of material prosperity has also been enshrined in subjects who live in accordance with the consumer capitalism.

### **'Prosperity' as incapacitation and disciplining of consumers**

Early in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the political implementation of the neo-liberal economy concept forced the capitalist expansion through the development of productive forces, increasing the consumption of the population. Despite the ecological crisis, which has been clearly evident since the 1970s, mass production for the sake of economic growth and the increase in the gross national product maintained. It has never been primarily about increasing the wealth of the population, but constantly about stimulating new advanced consumer needs to ensure the market for mass production. Sophisticated advertising strategies that produced an amalgam of goods and intangible needs are perfected by today's cult marketing, so that it is hardly possible for consumers to be free about knowing what satisfactions they seek as 'true' and 'meaningful' and what they want to reject as 'wrong' and 'meaningless'. The economic reason tries to maintain the capitalist expansion by technically perfected products in a rapid succession of production cycles that nobody really needs, but that is in demand and sold based on the manipulation of the consumers' needs.

The unfettered capitalism has extremized the free-market model of efficiency by maximizing growth and has reduced barriers in this regard. It undermines the welfare state and creates few winners alongside a variety of losers. People who do not conform to the ideal of a highly qualified and hyper-dynamic employee lose their place on the labour market. Finally, they are not even good consumers and are excluded from the society of consumers. The victims are especially people who threaten to fall out from the consensus of the society of consumers as a result of their living



conditions, their low qualification, critical life events, not least due to low income.

The hunt for increased economic efficiency dramatically increases social costs. Unemployment, daily stress and health problems extend, associated with a general state of discontent, lack of capability for attachment and hurried bustle. Part of this pathology of the consumerism is the fact that the economy based on efficiency criteria prevents the turn of society to more democratic and ecological values. Under the predominance of the economy it is not possible to connect market economy, social security, prosperity, and environmentally responsible behaviour in an equal partnership

Because of the growing consumerism in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the social stratification changed as well. The gap between rich and poor became greater, although the mass consumption ostensibly gave the impression that social equality would increase in a levelled consumer society. What changed, often only concerned the expanding choice between trivial consumption goods or options in lifestyle. Lifestyles could be differentiated and could be assigned to different social backgrounds (Informationen zu den Sinus-Milieus® 2011).

While social classes are defined by the collective life situation, work and relationships are identified through class consciousness and political interest organization, the social milieu approach relates only to consumer behaviour. It suggests, due to the extremely increased material prosperity to have removed classes and groups with antagonistic interests. The consumer society is held together by the increasing production of goods and material prosperity. The environment model of social milieus that is propagated today can be evaluated to the extent that it is the turn of the 'society of producers' into the 'society of consumers'. It corresponds to the rising activities in the mass consumption in recent decades. For the majority of people this consumption dominates and controls their social life. Thus, the mass consumption with its socially integrating function has proven more and more to be the basis for disciplining and disempowerment of consumers

who are reduced to the consuming mode of happiness, which is based on a broad infantilization (Barber 2007).

Looking below the surface, it has to be noted that needs are integrated repressively into the consumerist structure, which as a totalitarian complex – as a mega-machine – ensures the power over people by making them loyal to the mass consumption. The massive presence of heteronymous compensatory needs is an indicator of today's lack of freedom. Most people behave like a subaltern by subjecting themselves to the anonymous authority of advertising that forces people to obey without direct orders.

The compensatory interests and needs are evident in the striving of many people for convenient vicarious satisfaction. Rudolf Bahro believes that the compensatory interests are the inevitable reaction to the fact that political, economic and social factors restricted and blocked human development and loving acceptance of countless people at an early stage. The corresponding needs are fobbed off with vicarious satisfaction of all kinds. The one-sided pursuit of wealth and possessions compensates for human shortcomings and has led to deterioration in human affairs. Things that are important for human happiness such as family life, job satisfaction, good neighbourly relations, and close relationships with friends and small groups of people in local community life have developed insufficiently (Bahro 1977: 322).

The mass-produced needs cannot lead to a lasting satisfaction, as their satisfaction does not enrich the people's hearts. Their satisfaction does not lead to the growing ability to express needs, but to an unchanged return of the originally occurred needs. This stagnation in developing needs is welcome, because a lasting needs satisfaction with an increase in immaterial needs that are not mediated by the market, would question consumer capitalism. This way, the need to be inwardly rich must be constantly disappointed.

The consumerist satisfaction of needs as a result of the primacy of economic efficiency, maximum production and maximum consumption hurts the human being, destroys his environment, and foils strong

relationships to his fellow men. Only when the economy is limited to its original area of responsibility and competence, and its premises and imperatives are excluded from the life world human needs can develop outside of the profit structure of economic thinking. This change, however, is currently blocked by the general commodification of social life.

### **From ‘pathogenic consumption’ to ‘voluntary simplicity’**

The problem of the lifestyle of consuming is recognized by a growing number of people. Efforts to scale down the consumption to a ‘reasonable’ measure is still practiced, but to a very limited extent. Instead, the people try to be less harmful in relation to the over-consumption and orient themselves to environmental standards and the conditions of production of the goods (e.g. no use of child labour) as well as eco-labels.

In the 1930s Richard Gregg formulated a guidance concept that describes a ‘simple lifestyle’ as an alternative to the life in the modern society with its mass-production and consumption (Gregg 1936). Gregg’s idea was to make, on the basis of a Buddhist culture-specific value system, a contribution to a simple life that is neither dominated by asceticism nor based on heteronymous impulse control and oppression. Since the 1970ies, the idea of ‘voluntary simplicity’ has been further developed by Duane Elgin. With the scaling back of over-consumption, a higher life satisfaction is experienced by an increasing group of people in recent decades. Bahro also pleaded decisively for a simple lifestyle:

‘Only with a lifestyle based on the subsistence economy of voluntary simplicity and frugal beauty we can, if we also limit our numbers, hold on earth.’ (Bahro 1990: 320).

The lifestyle based on the ideal of ‘voluntary simplicity’ is seeking for a lower level of consumption and prefers values such as independence, self-sufficiency and environmental responsibility. The ‘contractive way of life’ – as Bahro called the alternative lifestyle – means turning away from the focus

on having. Similarly, status-oriented shopping and conspicuous consumption are discarded as a waste of time.

In his studies, the market researcher and sociologist Paul H. Ray, together with Sherry Ruth Anderson, has described empirically, in addition to the *Traditionalists* and the *Modernists*, a new lifestyle segment whose members he called *Cultural Creatives* (Ray and Anderson 2000). A new type of consumer, also identified by Ray, is the LOHAS type. The LOHAS act as a generic term for new lifestyles and the relevant consumers, based on health and sustainability (LOHAS = *Lifestyles of Health and Sustainability*).

This type of postmodern consumer proves to be Ego-oriented, independent, environmentally conscious, health-oriented and prefers organic products. It presents some trends that in terms of target group oriented marketing are referred to as 'sustainable'. But one must question the unilateral and distorting use of the key concepts 'health' and 'sustainability' because 'sustainability' is commercialized as a trend and marketed as a lifestyle. In marketing, it is not about promoting sustainability from environmental commitment, but about commercializing the idea of sustainability in order to be in trend and make a profit. Most consumers are not concerned about sustainability, but about a high level of consumer pleasures, fun and entertainment – while maintaining health and calming their own troubled consciousness. Apparently, this type of consumer fits well with the marketing interests of organic food industry and alternative tourism sector. In this respect, it is doubtful whether this trend actually describes people who consume sustainably. On the one hand, health and sustainability are discussed as a requirement in the post-modern lifestyle, on the other hand they have lost their critical point, so that the post-modern lifestyle failed to see the future problems or do anything about it in the sense of human awareness. The postmodern personality can be just anything, even 'ecologically oriented'.

The 'ecological orientation' can be distinguished by knowledge and action consistency. The knowledge about the environmental problems and the destruction of nature are far more pronounced in comparison to the

environmentally friendly actions. Thus, about 90% of people prove to be concerned about the environment, but only less than 5% buy organic food. The expressed opinions and attitudes do not show a logical shift in consciousness, but still remains as an attempt to a 'systemic damage control' (Bahro 1990), which is related to the stabilization of the economy in its current function. In terms of a so-called Megatrend partial small and manageable structures of organic agriculture are increasingly occupied and expanded at industrial scale. This is anything but a process that has to do with sustainability, because ecology is here clearly subordinated to the economy: the structures of the prevailing economy are combined with the large-scale industrial production of organic food - partly with the relocation of production and the imports of the goods from abroad.

This way, also the LOHAS that are oriented to health and sustainability remain a part of the ecological crisis, instead of recognizing their own share to the destruction process within a critical self-reflection. Also, the LOHAS specific lifestyle, at a subconscious level, - one could say with Bahro - wants the destruction, as long as the 'own interests, habits, convenience are not set aside' (Bahro 1990: 405).

Opposed to the LOHAS the alternative of the LOVOS is increasingly used, corresponding to the above-mentioned *Lifestyles of Voluntary Simplicity*. Although behind the voluntary simplicity there is no homogeneous lifestyle, as a central feature, the consistent post-materialist orientation can be specified, which includes a great social potential of the criticism of consumerism. As far as no drift can be found in this lifestyle, which leads to arbitrariness, hyper-flexibility and homelessness, it surely cannot be described as *post-modern*. Nevertheless, post-modern accents can be found, such as when asceticism is rejected and pleasure is approved - even if society is not for fun and the society's own beliefs rather than hedonistic, multi-optional, but as a socially responsible and communitarian. This lifestyle includes a wide range of behaviour and is a viable concept for the people who are attracted to a conscious lifestyle and begin to organize their everyday life in an environmentally sustainable manner.

The simple lifestyle is to be interpreted as the rejection of consumerism and means, in terms of Zygmunt Bauman, steps out of the society of consumers. The result of turning away from consumerism is a weakening of the social integration. To compensate for this loss the followers of the simple lifestyle create their own social environment with a new social consensus.

The *guiding principle for a sustainable lifestyle* is in general not to be less harmful towards nature and the environment but to integrate into the natural relationships in acting in a manner that neither pollutants are brought in the environment, nor devastation and erosion of soil by farming and livestock is produced. This idea stands for a life in which there is no more waste, which does not return within a short time in the natural cycle without consequences for nature and people (Braungart and McDonough 2002).

Previously established social structures that support sustainability are connected for example with action programs such as Agenda 21 and the corresponding local agendas. Worth mentioning here in particular are practical discourses to shape and change reality, such as the UN Decade (2005-2014) (*United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development*) has initiated. Other important factors are the networks and initiatives rising up from below established by the actors in their subworlds. On these grounds, below the level of the consumer society a new culture of participation is emerging, with its own networks and initiatives, purchasing groups, exchange markets, for-free-shops and their own regional currencies convertible to the Euro. These initiatives form a currently subdominant infrastructure that is further expandable.

### **The end of consumer capitalism?**

Critical comments on the consumer society are often based on a discontent, which shows an ambivalence inherent to the attitude of consumers, who purchase their total existence on the market and endanger their personal

integrity by the way of satisfying their needs without the chance for personal development.

The idea of self-damaging activities that produce their effects far beyond the personal sphere of life may be an indicator of a new consciousness that provides the basis for the transformation into an 'empathic civilization' (Rifkin 2009). During this transformation the perspective on history changes as well. The conventional historiography generally limited itself to phenomena such as the 'pathology of power', while simultaneously neglecting an anthropological and historical point of view at the empathetic disposition of man, his love and compassion which were considered only marginally (Rifkin 2009: 9f.). Today, however, the epochal trend includes an expansion and strengthening of the resulting empathic consciousness, which intensifies reflexively. This gives the idea of *Homo integralis* a new start. From this idea, the suggestion is made to direct our attention to the balancing and supporting forces in human relationships, rather than primarily to focus on the destructive processes in consumerism. The human attachments with empathy, love and care and happiness are experiencing the great potential for a withdrawal from the consumerism and building up an empathic civilization.

The emerging economies in Asia, still based on consumer capitalism, will have to deal with the destructive principles of this mode of production. The consumer capitalism is by no means a model for a sustainable form of economy.

Who is usurped in his needs and his consciousness can only develop fear of loss of everyday consumption. He lacks courage to take on these living conditions, which are restrictive, pathogenic, exploitative and humiliating forms of restrictions or denials of freedom. To enter into a simple life and leaving over-consumption behind provides chances for self-development, inner wealth, richness in human relations. In this long-term learning process the capacity for empathy is expanding to 'biosphere awareness' (Rifkin 2009: 417ff.). This awareness with its underlying empathy would be stronger than economism with its efficiency. For life-serving

reasons a renewal of society can only take place on the primacy of ecology. Due to the fundamental incompatibility and irreconcilability of capitalist economy and ecology, the economy is more willing to destroy the foundations on which it is built, as to submit to ecological requirements. An anticipatory resource policy and economy is certainly incompatible with the consumer capitalism. Conceivably, however, is a *post-growth society* (see Jackson and Lepprand 2009) that meets the criteria of a *natural capitalism* (see Hawken, Lovins and Lovins 1999).

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