

GLOBALIZATION AND THE CONSUMER SOCIETY

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Summary

Globalization is the rapid spread of the capitalist market around the world, including consumer society based on materials produced for a mass market. This is the current phase of a relationship in the past five hundred years linking overconsumption in rich groups and areas to underconsumption in poor ones. Overconsumption exceeds the limits of sustainability by using more resources than are needed to sustain a healthy quality of life and in ways that degrade the environment and those in it, while underconsumption is consumption that is inadequate to maintain a healthy quality of life for all. Most underconsumption in the global system is related to social inequity, which blocks some from needed resources, such as food.

In contrast, sustainable consumption does not cause environmental degradation. Sustainable consumption must include equity, for it falls into a “golden mean” range that harms neither the environment nor the lives and health of human beings. Developing sustainable consumption requires recognizing that overconsumption and underconsumption are linked in the global system. In a closed and interdependent ecosystem, the overconsumption of the few is only possible by the underconsumption of the many, for if everyone overconsumed like the affluent, the system would collapse. Eighty-six percent of private consumption worldwide is carried out by the richest 20% of the population, while the poorest 20% consume only 1.3%. Increasingly overconsumers are transferring the effects of environmental damage, including hazardous waste, to underconsumption areas, where there are lower wages, and less effective protection of worker safety and the environment. In sum, sustainable consumption is promoted through the careful and effective use of resources, conserving the planet for future generations, and removing harmful effects of both underconsumption and overconsumption to measurably improve the quality of life for all.

1. Introduction

Globalization and the expansion of the consumer society are intertwined. Globalization is the rapid spread of the capitalist market (including trade and private investment) around the world, integrating the exchange of resources, other diverse cultural patterns, and the growing relations between countries and regions. Since the colonial periods starting in the late sixteenth century, industrialization has been a global process in which resources (including labor) in one area of the world have been used for the benefit of those in other areas. In many respects, this is a process that has been going on for at least five thousand years, since the creation of the earliest city-states, with their class systems and market economies. The rise of contemporary consumer society focusing on the use of materials produced for a mass market is the current phase of this relationship that has in the past five hundred years increasingly linked rich areas and groups to poor ones, with rich areas being characterized by overconsumption and poor areas by underconsumption.

Contemporary consumer society can be characterized by what economist Kenneth Boulding calls the “cowboy” economy. Rooted in frontier areas during colonial times when resources seemed virtually limitless, this kind of economy emphasizes continual expansion in both production and consumption as desirable and necessary objectives. However, cowboy economies have tended to downplay the by-products of overconsumption, such as exhaustion of resources and pollution. These expanding economies characterize highly industrialized societies, regardless of whether they are capitalist, communist, socialist, or otherwise. In virtually all societies, despite cultural differences, the globalization of the consumer society has given status to high consumption, especially of items from the international market. Expensive items such as automobiles, televisions, video recorders (VCRs), and now computer equipment, are status symbols worldwide. Yet, overconsumption of these and other items generates refuse each year equivalent to Mt. Everests of solid waste and pollution. Currently, the richest 20% of the world is responsible for 86% of annual private consumption (with its accompanying waste and pollution) while the poorest 20% is responsible for only 1.3% of private consumption. This disparity in consumption is a by-product of the global cowboy economy which inextricably links affluence and poverty.

In contrast with the cowboy economy, sustainable development involves restructuring consumer society in ways that use resources carefully and effectively, conserving the planet for future generations, while measurably improving the present quality of life in all areas. This involves shifting into what Boulding calls a “spaceman” or “spaceship” kind of economy. Creativity in such sustainable development will be channeled not only into using fewer and fewer resources to accomplish more and more goals, with little or no harmful ecological effect, it will also be channeled into reducing existing consumption gaps between the haves and have-nots. This kind of consumption would fall into a kind of “golden mean” range, removing the harmful effects of both underconsumption as well as overconsumption, and could help improve the quality of life in all areas of the world, rich as well as poor, improve global security, and channel human ingenuity into new directions.

2. Theories of Globalization and the Consumer Society

While the many theories attempting to explain globalization and consumer society might be categorized in diverse ways, those frameworks can be separated into three major types: (1) top-down theories, (2) bottom-up theories, and (3) ecological theories. These kinds of theories cut across disciplines and cultures and, like all theories, tend to reflect diverse social or interest groups.

2.1. Top-down Theories

The work of most Western economists reflects a top-down perspective characteristic of the affluent of the world, whether they are in highly industrialized or developing countries. These theories have been used to analyze the global market from an investment perspective, and have been used by those who already have money to make more. Walter Rostow's stages of economic change theory has been particularly influential, suggesting that all countries go through the same stages of development as they industrialize. This approach suggests that development automatically "trickles down" throughout the class systems of countries and regions experiencing it. This perspective looks uncritically at consumer society, seeing consumption as a good and necessary force driving production and fueling market forces. Contemporary advertising or marketing exemplifies the top-down perspective that consumption is inherently good or necessary by making it a status symbol, to be "cool" or "modern" to use particular products associated with wealth, power, and prestige. This has been a highly effective approach to mass marketing, producing massive profits for the wealthy and for capitalist organizations, such as multinational corporations. However, economic and political institutions, even in the most democratic countries, relying on this kind of top-down analysis have tended to ignore or minimize the importance of the growing ecological problems, as well as the growing economic and political gap between the wealthy and the poor. Democratic systems using this kind of top-down theory tend to act as if an open political system automatically leads to an open economic system, often ignoring or minimizing the effectiveness of the power/wealth/status structure in maintaining the gap between the top and the bottom.

2.2. Bottom-up Theories

Bottom-up theories call attention to the fact that the world does not look the same for the disenfranchised as it does for the affluent and powerful. Immanuel Wallerstein's "world-system" theory has been among the most influential of the bottom-up theories. In it, Wallerstein argues that all states are part of capitalist world economy in which inequality is a product of the basic forces driving that economy. From Wallerstein's perspective, the end of inequality is tied to the end of capitalism. The work of Indian economist Amartya Sen, recently recognized with the Nobel Prize, also calls attention to the fact that the view from the bottom is very different from the view from the top. His work on famine makes clear how processes of distribution, rather than simply the availability of food, have been major factors in either causing or preventing famines. By outlining how significant the control of wealth and power is in mass societies, bottom-up theories help identify processes which disenfranchise people and in mobilizing them for change. These theories have been quite varied, using many different approaches for

analysis and for mobilizing people. They have included such diverse forms as the egalitarianism rooted in tribal classless societies in Africa and other continents, the democratic socialism of western European countries like Sweden or Norway, varieties of Islamic “socialism,” Christian or other religious “communalism,” as well as the communist parties of the former Soviet bloc countries, China, and other countries.

Communist parties have very effectively mobilized masses of people to take power. However, once in power in the Soviet Union, China, Cuba, and other allied states, the party assumed the paradoxical characteristic of using a top-down approach. Once in power, the party perpetuated itself as the new class controlling state power and the means of production, although also effectively transforming many social structures (such as education, food, health care, and work) in ways that make them more accessible to those at the bottom. While communist parties have had different objectives than the capitalist class in power, their top-down approach when in power has tended to down play ecological problems and the gap between the haves and have-nots. While capitalist top-down approaches (at least in the more democratic countries) have ignored the importance of economic equity while focusing on political equity, communist parties in power have ignored the importance of political equity, while focusing on economic equity. Dictatorial capitalist regimes, as in apartheid South Africa, have ignored both political and economic equity.

2.3. Ecological Theories

Ecological theories acknowledge that all things in a natural system are interconnected and that patterns or changes in one area can affect those in others. For example, a recent study directed by Shanna Swan made newspaper headlines because it showed a strong decrease in sperm counts in the United States and Europe. It is just the most recent and apparently the most definitive of a number of studies exploring the dropping sperm count in industrialized countries. Swan’s study, like many previous ones, suggests a link between the use of chemicals, such as pesticides and herbicides, in the environment and reproductive and other changes in humans and other animals. Numerous studies of endocrine-disrupting chemicals suggest that cancer is not the only or perhaps even the most toxic effect of such chemicals. Even more damaging may be the links between birth defects and chemical exposure to pesticides or herbicides. For example, higher occurrence of birth defects has been found both among children of farmers who handle pesticides and among families simply living in the same areas. These studies link chemical use to such diverse problems as learning disabilities and increased aggression. Moreover, they raise serious questions about what has been going on over time in industrialized societies, including declining school test scores, and increasing patterns of violence. These studies warn against overly simplistic explanations that ignore the role of the social environment.

Ecological theories are inherently holistic. However, they are not inherently just or equitable. They may include either top-down or bottom-up perspectives, with quite different policy and social consequences. For example, an ecological analysis, even in the name of scientific “objectivity,” which does not directly address the social structures maintaining inequity will tend to perpetuate and even exacerbate the gap between the top and the bottom. Ecological analysis helps in understanding the processes that result

in ecological balance, but it is possible to have societies that are ecologically balanced while devoid of justice or equity, including ones in which the majority live in misery while a minority live in affluence. Only dictatorial social systems could indefinitely maintain such inequity.

Ecological theories have only gradually come to overtly include the importance of inequity and human rights issues in resolving human ecological and other problems, and this encyclopedia represents this perspective. It uses a holistic ecological framework aimed both at conservation for future generations and at facilitating sustainable development bridging the growing gap between the affluent and impoverished in the present. It recognizes that ecological solutions have to involve not just appropriate technology, but social approaches that involve more and more people from both the bottom and the top in developing solutions that benefit them all as well as future generations.

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Biographical Sketch

Catherine Hodge McCoid is professor of anthropology at the Department of History and Anthropology, Central Missouri State University, USA. She holds a Ph.D and a MA in anthropology from the University of Missouri, Columbia. She is the coordinator of Consultants' Network for the National Association for the Practice of Anthropology and Society for Applied Anthropology. She has been analyzing data in a cross-national survey of over 100 countries of relationships between population patterns, violence, health, other variables, and social change. It involves data from the 1940s through the present as well as historical case studies. A number of papers and other publications have come from it. In addition, she has written a number of articles on public policy, health, and gender issues including such topics as breast cancer policy in the United States, the Feminism of Eleanor Burke Leacock, and dowry deaths in India.