

# GLOBALIZATION AND CONSUMER CULTURES

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### **1. Consumption as a socio-behavioral complex**

Consumption is a socioeconomic function and cultural complex through which people, for their own well-being or that of the group (normally family or business), acquire or use goods and services that are available in the market. Although the market is the arena in which the purchase is carried out and in which the consumer acts as market demand, consumption is a more complex social function than mere purchase, and, as such, may be, and often is, affected by stimulus other than simple rational economic interest. This is the case in stimuli stemming from the subculture of the consumer's social ecosystem (values, beliefs, symbols, habits, etc.) or from the legal restrictions of his country.

Although it is a specific person who normally carries out the act of consuming, the psychological, economical, and biological stimuli are of lesser importance from a sociological perspective. Rather, we seek to perceive the act as a social representation, albeit individual, as the product of a particular culture with the understanding that the same act carried out in a different culture would have a different representation. The study of subcultures and social groups, which instil through a process of socialization, is therefore of tantamount importance in the area of consumption. Special reference is made to the family unit, which we consider to be the fundamental unit of consumption in a cultural and economic sense.

The home has always been an important centre of consumption and, in the future, the household, the house, the family, and all domestic devices, including the automobile, will change the shape of society and also of market demand. The family of the future will be nuclear, with the structure and characteristics of a primary group as opposed to being an institution for upholding private rights. Intelligent, secure, and ecological housing full of computerized, telephonic, and robotic domestic equipment will allow activities such as online education, online healthcare, online security, online shopping and online jobs to take place. It will be one more sign of the success of liberal ideology in a new stage of the global market economy based on the atomization of the population, non-interventionist state policy, the commercialization of work and the deregulation of social relations.

As stated by Tezanos and Bordas, "Technology, individualism, rationalism, hedonism, sense of reputation, and a 'Do it Yourself' credence may possibly become some of the points of reference for the new families and social groups in their processes of socialization and re-socialization..."

The current interest in consumer behavior and the social factors which motivate and guide it is relatively new. Despite the attention the subject often receives in social media, we can consider this interest relatively new from three perspectives: that of economists, that of sociologists, and that of the consumers themselves.

From the perspective of economic behavioral theorists, it must be acknowledged that the classical economists from Smith to Marx, with the relative exception of Malthus, considered the process of production to be by far the most important of all economic processes (production, commercialization, consumption, and recycling). As well, among the different factors in production (raw materials, labor, capital, and management), they considered the most important to be labor and capital. The theorists used relationships between these factors implicitly to explain social inequality as well as consumption, ignoring not only other non-economical determining factors in social group behavior but also ignoring, or undervaluing, demand. Even Keynes began to take notice of this fact. It was as if the Law of Say, and Ricardo's reformulation of it, was still in effect in the terms of "all supply generates its own demand", trusting that a good product will always find a buyer.

From the perspective of sociologists, consideration of consumption in terms of the construction of the personal and social identity of citizens began in the nineteenth century. The observations of Veblen and Simmel have been expanded in the twentieth century through the works of Flügel, Bocock, Dichter, Baudrillard, Certou, and Giddens, all contributing to a conceptual framework which extends from the emergence of the new idle class to the consequences of individualism, narcissism, and the dominance of 'me', and passing through the productive and active 'tactics' developed by individuals within the setting of their consumer activity. This explains the current developments in marketing, in commercial investigation, and in the different studies performed on the consumer. How many are there? What are they like? Who are they? Where are they? What are their needs and expectations? And on consumer habits: What are they buying? Who is doing the buying? Where are they buying? How much are they buying? Who are they buying for? How are they buying? How much are they buying?

From the perspective of the consumers themselves, 'consumerism' is also a relatively new movement. It first came into existence with the Consumers League of New York, created in 1891, whose initial efforts entailed comprising a list of companies that offered decent salaries and good, safe working conditions in order to decide whom to do business with. The movement's intention was collective action, as with the unions, but in this case as rational and socially sensible consumers, working through consumer cooperatives, so that the slightest commercial relationship between salesman and consumer would take on a more social, more balanced, and decidedly fairer dimension.

As a consequence of the interest of businessmen for their clients, of the pressure imposed by organized consumers in consumer cooperatives, and of the evolution of the

human rights state to the welfare state, consumers, as workers had done before them, broke away from commercial law and acquired new rights not only as purchasers but also as consumers. These rights guaranteed their interests and are normally considered as five:

1. The Right to Protection of Health and Safety
2. The Right to Protection of Economic Interests
3. The Right to Compensation for Damage Ensued
4. The Right to Information and Education
5. The Right to Representation in Consumer Bodies.

The acknowledgement of consumer rights made 'consumerism' viable as an ideology and permitted the consumer cooperatives (comparable to unions) to be substituted by consumer associations (similar to political parties). These associations could exercise their rights without having to reach an agreement on whether or not to buy a particular product or service as an exertion of pressure. It was a change from consumers as themselves to consumers for themselves; to consumerism as a social movement which, as well as exercising its rights, could establish a political strategy in a market economy where workers had progressively less voice and consumers progressively more.

Along with the acknowledgement of consumer rights, market development underwent a series of structural changes which showed it was in the company's best interest to give greater consideration to the consumer.

1. Larger quantity and variety of supply than demand.
2. Rapid rate of obsolescence of products and services on offer.
3. Heavy competition in quality and price among product and service suppliers.
4. Heavy competition in social and environmental conditions among product and service suppliers.
5. Aggressive commercial communication in search of client behavioral changes.

Just as we have discussed five basic rights of the consumer and five structural changes in the market, we can also outline five basic postulates of the consumerism movement:

1. The demand for safety and salubrity in used or consumed products and services, especially with regards to food, medicine, and household appliances.
2. The demand for value, especially in the case of groceries and other common products or those which are most affected by inflation in national economies.
3. The demand for compensation for damage stemming from a product or service on loan to a private user or consumer, consumer group, or in the social or natural environment, with appropriate legal recourse.
4. The demand for education to permit responsible consumption and full information on existing products and services in the market, detailing the characteristics of the raw materials used, of the working conditions and salaries of its producers,

compliance with tax regulations and social action on the part of the company, including its environmental accountability, etc. so that a biography of the product or service is offered rather than a mere prospectus.

5. The demand for financial and material means, as well as institutional channels, to ensure the presence of consumer associations in bodies of representation, control, arbitration, and negotiation where they can assert and monitor their rights.

In summary, the importance of consumers rests not only in their role as customers or purchasers, but also in the new 'consumer' culture which allows them to be progressively more demanding with regards to product and service value, as well as in the political, social, and environmental *biography* of these products and services. This forces, or tends to force, companies to adapt their supply to the demand, using progressively social marketing strategies in order to survive in an uncertain and competitive market.

Since the function of consuming is basically social, we want to place it within an outline of a complex, fragmented and dynamic society which we have labelled the *global kaleidoscopic society*. The communicative world, in which the spectator-consumer lives, is the kaleidoscope cylinder. The glass pieces of the kaleidoscope contain the *social world*, where men and women reside within their families and habitats, the *political world*, where citizens reside, and the *economic world*, where producers and consumers co-exist in the market.

However, we must assert from the beginning that any analysis performed on cultural and economic consumer behavior from a globalization perspective exclude millions of the planet's inhabitants. This is not from a lack of culture or market on their part, nor that they are unaffected by globalization, but because their condition of need is so great and their ability to fulfil this so poor that searching for a model of consumer behavior based on value or the *biography* of a product or service would not only be futile, but also unforgivable.

## **2. The kaleidoscope society**

The kaleidoscope society is that which is produced by the process of atomization and abstraction that human beings have been subjected to from the beginning of the contemporary age to the present. It requires that they daily and simultaneously live within three dimensions: in the *social world*, the *political world*, and the *economic world*. All of these are contained within and conform with the *communicative world*.

The *social world*, where men and women reside, is driven by culture and guided by the institutions which structure the society, and involves a certain influence from nature. It is also where children, who are converted into 'members' by their families, fulfil the role of 'students', as abstract children within a formal, regulated, and versatile educational system, to become, as adults, proper 'residents' of their cities. The *social world* is the smallest, the most dependent on nature, and the closest to individuals.

The *social world* is the ecosystem where a population resides within a territory, which it transforms by means of an organization, a technology, and a language of its own—that

is to say, through a culture of its own—for survival purposes.

The *social world* is not only a given world but also, as Morin points out, it is a world produced "by the interactions of those individuals who comprise it and which, as in all things, retroacts to produce individuals through education, language, and schooling, which in turn produces the individuals who produced it. All this develops in a sort of spiral circuit throughout history."

The second world is the *political world*, guided by rules and channelled through a legal framework established as a result of the correlation of existing political forces, and is that world in which 'citizens' reside free and equal before the law. This world is more artificial and of a more intermediary dimension.

The *political world* is the most artificial and most virtual, and is where 'citizens' live within the scope of political institutions. This world receives the demands of the *social world* and the *economic world* as inputs of information and releases laws which regulate human behavior in the form of regulatory outputs which have as much influence in the *social world* as in the *economic world*. The *political world* is a formal world whose power rests in being the *demiurge of artificial nature*, of the society in which human beings live.

The *economic world*, motivated by interest, is that in which producers, in the role of abstract employees, and consumers reside. The *economic world* is the largest, most international, and most global of all.

The *economic world* is the playing field for companies and it all takes place in the market, an area in which a large number of companies try to obtain maximum profit at a minimum cost by adapting their supply to the demand, attempting to offer better conditions than the competition. This is achieved through improved allocation of their scarce resources in the different stages of the economic process (production, distribution, consumption, and recycling) in order to obtain their objectives through the use of the distinct production factors (raw materials, labor, capital, and management) with those who operate in the various economic sectors (agriculture, industry, constructions and services).

The *economic world* may not be the only world in which consumers reside, but it is certainly the most important. It has gone through three commercial scenarios throughout the last centuries which were based in 'orientation towards production', 'orientation towards consumption', and 'orientation towards fidelity'.

The initial economic view, which gave predominance to the production process and manufacturing process and subsequent importance to labor and capital, left consumption somewhat outside of the scope of commercial law. A similar thing occurred to labor itself in the process of evolution between the class-based society and the industrial society. Consumption was reduced to commerce and the law only extended to guaranteeing a legal procedure for the act of one individual transferring ownership of a good to another in exchange for a price.

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