

CHANGING PATTERNS OF CONSUMPTION

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Keywords: Employment, consumption, consumerism, corruption, demand, development, frugality, growth, production, underdevelopment, supply

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Summary

When mutual developed and developing world accusations of overpopulation and overconsumption are analyzed, several levels of confusion can be pointed out. Since proposals to change global patterns of consumption come from different and even conflicting sources, they should be the object of careful consideration. Changes in consumption influence employment, and therefore they could be detrimental to many, especially in developing countries. In order to assess the proposals, an account of actual patterns of change in different sectors of the economy must be undertaken. When proposals for change are carefully looked at, the gap between the developed and the developing nations becomes obvious, since in the developed countries an overall decrease in consumption is often promoted whereas in the developing world just the opposite is true. Linear approaches in the study of changes in consumption patterns fail to explain many social facts like the coexistence of different stages of development and the lapse into previous ones. Consequently, non-linear approaches are to be preferred. Some profound changes in consumption patterns could be made without making the situation even worse. In general, those changes would improve the consumption standards of the poor without increasing ecological problems.

1. Old Ideas and New Problems

As an ethical issue, consumption is both an old topic and a new problem. In the strictest sense, consumption takes place when something is used up so that it no longer exists in its previous form. In a broader sense, consumption is just the other side of production. For each commodity, product, and service, a corresponding consumer is expected. It is in such a broad sense that the term is taken here. Since consuming is one of the actions

we can perform, or rather a large collection of different types of activities, and ethics deals with human actions from the viewpoint of good and bad human acts, the issue of good versus bad consumption is as old as ethics, although obviously the terminology was not there for centuries. Traditional vices like greed and old-fashioned virtues like frugality deal with use and abuse of what we call today goods and services.

Several proposals have been recently advanced as to how consumption should change, in view of the problems that contemporary patterns present both for the natural environment and for individuals in today's society. For the analysis of the feasibility of such proposals it is useful to consider how patterns of consumption have in fact changed over the years, first in general and then according to particular types of consumption. In addition, in order to explore the reasons for such proposals, it is pertinent to consider why consumption has become an important topic today (see *Combating Poverty*).

2. Overconsumption and Overpopulation

It was during the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, that a clear symmetry of two mutual accusations became widespread and very obvious: whereas in industrial nations the complaint is heard that people in poor nations have excessive rates of reproduction, poor countries complain that people in advanced industrial societies consume in excess. Herman E. Daly echoes this concern when he says that "evidently" the developing world must strive to control population while the industrialized nations should control consumption per capita. Too many people and too much consumption are thus seen as serious problems for the sustainability of human life on earth. As a result of the new concern for consumption, since 1992 several studies have been added to the literature on the topic. In recent research projects consumption has been analyzed from perspectives other than economics, such as psychology and ethics. For example, links of consumption with clinical depression have been documented in high mass-consumption societies. It is no wonder then that proposals to tackle the problems of consumption in the developed nations now abound.

Consider first some of the difficulties to be found in the symmetrical accusations themselves. To begin with, it is not clear how the accusations are to be understood. Fertility rates are by no means identical in all the countries usually lumped together as the developing world, some of which have low birth rates and comparatively small populations. Population density is much higher in Europe and Japan than in many developing countries. Although we find countries like India with a very high constant increase in population, we also find several countries in the developing world with few demographic changes (i.e. few births and few deaths in a given period of time). Thus, instead of talking about the developing world as a homogeneous group of countries, statements about the need to control population increase would be clearer if they were made in reference to specific countries or regions and in connection with other variables, such as food and water availability.

On the other hand, there is some degree of confusion about the meaning of the accusation that developed countries have a high level of consumption. It is clear that at the beginning of the twenty-first century there were currently about a billion people who lived on less than a dollar a day and a similar number who had no access to clean

water, whereas many families already had two cars and more than one television set and VCR. It is also clear that the second group consumed about 80% of the world's products every year.

But it is tautological to say that developed countries consume more if by “developed countries” is meant just those that consume more and, no matter what indicator is taken for the definition of “development,” it ultimately comes down to some kind of consumption—health care, education, housing, and so on. For the statement to say something interesting, one needs to show that developed countries consume more of the earth's resources, not more of the “world's products.” Of course they consume more of the world's products; that is exactly why they are called “developed.” Suppose that one can show that the developed countries consume more of non-renewable resources than do developing countries. Such a statement would be more informative, and many would argue that it could be taken *prima facie* as an indictment of industrial nations. But this still would not be enough. For the statement to mean something important one would have to add another premise, namely, that non-renewable resources cannot be replaced by some other type of resources. If developing countries can use other resources for the improvement of the quality of life, then the statement would merely mean that some countries consume some non-renewable resources and other countries consume, or may eventually consume, other non-renewable and renewable resources.

So, it is frequently stated that each child born in the United States will consume in its lifetime many times the amount of electricity consumed by a child born in India, and the contention is that such a fact by itself reveals something about the problem of consumption. It does not, since it merely points to the obvious fact that there are great differences between developed and underdeveloped countries as far as levels of consumption are concerned, and that to the extent that the latter ones approach the living standards of the former levels of consumption will necessarily rise.

For the accusation against high levels of consumption in the industrialized nations to be informative, more precision is needed. The easiest way to do this is to connect consumption with use of natural resources, and to claim that high levels of consumption in the developed world will necessarily reduce the possibilities for consumption in the developing world. Two aspects of the same claim can be considered. On the one hand, more consumption of non-renewable resources affects in particular those countries that are latecomers in the use of such resources, by reducing their future possibilities. On the other hand, consumption in developed countries produces large amounts of pollutants that affect, among other things, global climate.

When these distinctions are made, it is possible to explore the idea that underdeveloped countries suffer on both counts. First, because non-renewable resources are depleted by developed countries. Second, because the latter countries dump in the atmosphere and elsewhere pollutants that constitute a threat to all, but especially to the poor, who suffer from the bad consequences of consumption without reaping the benefits thereof. Interestingly enough, the indictment can be made by some developing nations against other developing nations, and by some regions within them against other regions.

Moreover, some authors are willing to extend the statement to the point of seeing present levels of consumption by advanced industrial nations as a threat to the continuation of life on the planet. There are at least two ways to do this.

- (a) The first way begins with the claim that the depletion of non-renewable resources will make human life on earth impossible. If we assume that eventually all of these resources will be depleted, even if it takes a long time, and that there is no substitute for them, then it seems clear that countries that are not developed now will have no chance of becoming so if present consumption trends in developed countries continue at the same pace. However, this claim is subject to many objections. Perhaps the most important one is that non-renewable resources can be left alone or even depleted without catastrophic consequences, by shifting to the use of other resources, such as sunlight and recyclable materials. A future can be envisaged where the consumption of all goods and services will be done under the guidance of the four principles associated with sustainability: reduction of the use of new resources to the strictly necessary, recycling of everything that can be recycled, reutilization of things where possible, and refusal to use non-renewable resources in favor of renewable ones. Fortunately, economic history has shown the ability of human beings to substitute some resources for others. The introduction of electricity for domestic use, for example, saved millions of trees from becoming charcoal. Online versions of newspapers, accessible on the Internet, are now saving many others.

This should not be construed as a defense of the status quo. An apology for developed countries is sometimes made by saying that the differences in consumption and population compensate each other in the sense that, since each individual in a developed country consumes more resources than each inhabitant in an underdeveloped country, developed countries satisfy their obligations towards others by keeping fertility rates low as long as the developing nations continue with high rates of population increases. An equilibrium is thus reached: in one case high consumption is multiplied by low population increases, whereas in the second case low consumption is multiplied by high population increases. The end result in one case will tend to be similar to the other case. This approach, which amounts to a justification of present conditions, will lead us nowhere since there is only one environment and ecological problems recognize no boundaries.

- (b) The second approach is taken by those who claim that the ecosystems impose limits on the amount of resources that can be taken from them precisely because the ecosystems are limited, not only as providers of the resources needed to make the economy function, but also as disposers of the wastes created in the process, which cannot accumulate indefinitely. This is what Herman E. Daly argues forcefully in his article “Consumption: value added, physical transformation, and welfare.” Daly introduces the notion of “value added by nature” to explain how value added by human labor presupposes the availability of resources that are created by nature, not by humans, through a process of preparation that is a necessary condition for the incorporation of raw materials into the economic process, which gives us goods and services but also garbage and waste. Daly points out that economists and others alike miss the value added by nature and focus only on value added by labor, as if

nature could provide indefinite amounts of ready-to-be-processed raw materials and absorb ever-increasing amounts of waste, without limit. The notion of value added by nature provides an excellent conceptual tool to understand why the earth's carrying capacity could be taxed by consumption up to a limit beyond which there is no return. It is hard to contend with Daly, even if we agree with critics like Mark Sagoff, who argues that the notion of economic growth cannot be automatically equated with an increase in the use of resources and that in fact there can be economic growth with a lesser use of energy and matter. But even if the economy can grow by recycling materials and diminishing the amount of energy needed for a given process, there are limits to earth's carrying capacity and the situation today in some regions of the world, where severe ecological deterioration goes hand-in-hand with high population increases, is an indication thereof (see *Population and Demographic Change*).

3. Two Perspectives

The problem of consumption as it is presented in contemporary terms can be seen from two perspectives: that of the developed world and that of the developing world. In the industrialized developed world, the concern for overconsumption and consumerism is a powerful motive for the analysis of the limits of consumption. Most proposals on how to change patterns of consumption focus on consumers, who are expected either to consume less of everything or to shift from self-centered to socially beneficial consumption. In the developing world, the big gap between those who consume too much and those who have no access to consumption leads authors to inquire into the inequity built into the structure of societies and in international relations.

The first disaggregation of the notion of consumption is thus between those for whom consumption is a choice and those who lack basic needs and for whom consumption is not a choice. The issue is usually not presented as a matter of less consumption for the sake of global sustainability, but of more consumption for the large masses of the dispossessed for the sake of social justice. Proposals made in the developing world tend to promote public policies aimed at redistributing consumption.

The global and undifferentiated reduction of consumption, cherished by some authors in the advanced developed nations, finds many opponents in the developing world, who consider such plans a threat for the jobs and future well-being of millions in developing nations.

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Biographical Sketch

Luis Camacho completed his M.A. at Universidad Complutense, Madrid, and his Ph.D. at the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., in 1973. He was a full-time professor at the University of Costa Rica from 1972 to 2002. After retiring, he has continued as an *ad honorem* professor at that university. Dr. Camacho has authored several books including *Introducción a la lógica, Lógica Simbólica Básica, Filosofía para la Educación Diversificada, Cultura y Desarrollo, Ciencia, Tecnología en el Subdesarrollo*. He has also written over 30 articles on logic, philosophy of science, philosophy of technology, and the relation between science, technology, and development. Dr. Camacho is the president of the Costa Rican Philosophical Association and a founding member of the International Development Ethics Association.