

Faced with today's food and energy crisis,
how can society improve its well-being?

Summary

Nowadays prosperity is not a matter of new technology and expanding markets. The emerging crises have displayed how unlikely any further advancement is in its popular sense. Under Consumerism we have lost our individuality to the identities offered by the market the same way others lost theirs to the one granted by the Party under Communism. Consumerism has modified our aspirations and set our goals, but the improvement of well-being cannot be achieved within the meaning put forward by our age of brands and false identities. To really progress without the bountiful resources our predecessors had at their disposal, we need to reinvent the concept of well-being itself.

Essay

Well-being means a state of happiness, achievement and prosperity. To attain this blessed state, mankind has tramped a little path running through technological advancement and innovative social engineering. This path has become by now a wide highway. Whereas the recent economic slowdown has formed a huge bump on the way, the energy and food crises are certainly leading to a dead end. If the geography of what we understand as well-being is failing, the whole concept needs to be reconsidered.

The concept of happiness, achievement and prosperity is a function of tradition, knowledge and comprehension. Past experiences and arising opportunities have jointly created an idea of what it means to be content and successful nowadays. Unfortunately, the formula for achievement in the 21st century includes a huge cost, that is the gradual loss of sustainability. Energy resources depletion and the rise of food prices result from lavish consumption and unsound practices. To lower the cost we need to change the perception of well-being, in order to be able to replace the dead end with a crossroad. In other words, we have to bid farewell to consumerism.

Free markets have been the panacea for transition countries, newly emerging democracies and developing countries especially since Milton Friedman promoted the Chicago School's devotion to consumer choice and economic liberty. While that might have been beneficial for our forerunners after the World Wars, the contemporary version of capitalism starts to transform into an advertisement in a fashion magazine. Consumerism is like a new Communism, a doctrine with pre-designed identities for people to assume. Engulfed by glamorous lifestyles and identical reveries of success, we have lost our real selves to a handful of ready-made Donald Trumps, Carrie Bradshaws, Blair Waldorfs and Paris Hiltons.

People have long surrendered their place as the focus of life and interaction, to things like computers, TV sets, clothes and hairstyles. If people are not important, how can they be

happier, less afraid of crime, less prone to racism and terrorist extremism? Have we surrendered our identities to replace them with the identity of the system?

Philosophers have tackled this surrender in a variety of historical contexts. The German philosopher Martin Heidegger elaborated on the concept of the real self. Heidegger was interested in the connection between the mind and the body. His most prominent work "*Sein und Zeit*" examines the possible meanings and acts of the being. He was concerned with finding the real, authentic self, the one Sein among many Daseins. The Dasein, he said, was the living self, the one produced by circumstances and therefore existing within the precepts of the today. "*Everyone has become another and no one is himself*", he says. The same happens nowadays. We have gone so far from living responsibly and being content with whatever we have got, that we have lost ourselves to the huge illusion of achieving an ideal state of *well-being* manifested through consumption. We have been so profoundly brainwashed by the continuous desire for more and by slavery to brands and lifestyles, that the only thing that might turn us back to our senses is the dawn of a crisis to remind us that there is a limit to being cool and wasteful. The inconsistency of the Heidegger parallel is in the ultimate outcome. For Heidegger the imminence of death and its realization will save the humans and bring them back to their authentic selves. In our world of "*celebrity magazines, television with five hundred channels and some guy's name on my underwear*" (*Fight Club*, 1999) the realization of mortality only makes things worse. It drives people insane. They struggle to find a cure for old-age, to master the power to perpetuate youth, to look their best possible, drive the best possible, paint one's nails with the best possible, while one still can.

To escape the negative associations with fascism, which Martin Heidegger's name might evoke, we might as well consider Vaclav Havel, one of the most loved and admired intellectuals of the 20th century. He was concerned about the viability of democracy in the immediate period after the fall of the Berlin wall. He recognized the inevitable effect of life under Communism on people's minds and individualities. His famous example with the everyday greengrocer illustrates an ideology of the lost self. The Communist party has given the people an illusion of identity and they have lost their own. Consumerism nowadays does the same for our world. The right mindset, stunning looks, pronounced sexuality and preferred pastimes, are being popularized not only by magazines and movies, but also through the example of those around us who managed to climb the ladder of what has become the model of success.

Having pushed the limits of progress for as much as we could, it seems that the only way ahead is to go back to simpler life. However, surrendering the assembly-line identity for an authentic self does not sound like a retreat, but rather like a laudable cause. While the resources to improve our well-being do not allow the irresponsible advancement of the previous century, a reinvention of the concept of happiness, achievement and prosperity gives us the hope for survival and evolution. Once again, the answer proves to be not in a political doctrine or an economic model, but inside each of us.