

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

Abstract

Society can improve its well-being by adopting an anti-consumerist lifestyle. Nowadays people are so immersed in immediate gratification that they have forgotten to think about the future of the planet. In our consumerist society we are convinced that we should identify ourselves with the purchases we make. However, the theory of eco-localism and the concept of “voluntary simplicity” emerge as a ray of light to the painful reality of a food and energy crisis. People should realize that the quality of their lives is not measured by the quantity of their purchases, that life must be enjoyed and not bought.

Unfortunately, today the world is not the good place to live in that it used to be. Not only that it is consistently increasing, but more than half of the global population currently lives in cities and the United Nations predicts that by 2030, 60 percent of the total world population will live in them. This phenomenon puts an enormous pressure on the municipalities and their function of providing equal services to all of its citizens. Among the “inalienable rights” granted to every one of us are invariably nutritious food supplies and access to energy. Unfortunately, the people who live in the cities have acquired urban lifestyle that propagates extravagance and profusion. If society does not change its consumerist culture, it is doomed.

Nowadays, the people living in cities enjoy various amenities and services. Thanks to technology their life has become easier and they have more disposable income and more spare time. When those two features are combined, it is natural that the citizens will buy more products and services than they actually need. The purchase is no longer a necessity but a sign of prosperity and a certain lifestyle. The more you buy, the better you feel about yourself. People do not purchase an ordinary blouse or trousers, they look for the brands that have flooded their everyday life- Prada, Gucci, Levi's, etc. Thus, they gradually got used to waste their time and resources on products that they do not actually need. They have learnt to be profuse. This wastefulness has been deeply enrooted in their modern lifestyle and determines their behavior in other spheres as well: they buy more food than they need for the day and throw whatever is left, because they can afford to buy more on the next day.

The cure for today's food and energy crisis is to focus our attention on the promotion of anti-consumerism. This “giant step for humanity” should begin with the alteration of the movie industry. Last week I watched “Sex and the City” the movie and I was shocked how many advertisements were soaked in it- brands, brands, brands. There are so many teenage girls who have watched this movie and the series in awe and have dreamt of the expensive clothes and the notorious Manolo Blahnik shoes that Carrie buys every day. These girls want to have money in order to afford those luxurious goods that speak of extravagant taste and lifestyle. But is this necessary? If we are careless about our nature and we manufacture product after product, we will suffocate our planet. And vanity will be eventually in vain. According to Rees planet

Earth has a certain carrying capacity. This is “the maximum “load” that can safely be imposed on the environment by people.”¹ This load is calculated by multiplying the world population by its per capita consumption. The latter is rapidly escalating thanks to technological innovation and global trade. Even if we leave aside the concern for the environment, consumerism must be stopped because it is unfair. According to UN more than half of the world’s wealth is concentrated in 2% of the world population, while there are 1.2 billion people living on less than a dollar per day.²

In his article *Eco-Localism and Sustainability* Curtis introduces the idea that the world can become more economically sustainable if local communities are formed that rely on themselves. According to this paradigm every region will depend on its own resources and society will not pay the negative externalities of increased pollution and depletion of nonrenewable resources. I support eco-localism, because the products and services that will be rendered to the community will be customized to their respective wants and will not be some junky products that are mass-produced in China’s sweatshops. Thus, local businesses will produce only the goods that are needed without inventory. There is another advantage of this theory: the reduced transportation costs, which are significantly lower than that on the global market, where the product, which is “Made in China”, travels thousands of kilometers before it reaches its destination.

Curtis refers to Elgin’s term “voluntary simplicity”, which is the decision of people not to measure their quality of life with the quantity of their numerous products and gadgets.³ In this way people will not be so obsessed with earning the money needed for the purchase of the next gizmo but will have spare time to socialize, to travel, to watch plays and to enjoy their meaningful life. On the other hand, eco-localism may sound ridiculous in the era of globalization. However, it must be emphasized that the theory does not suggest the isolation of communities from the rest of the world, but the necessity of every region to realize its competitive advantage in terms of natural, human, social, physical and financial resources⁴. Only after that, can this community contribute to the common good and can interact adequately with the rest of the world.

In conclusion I believe that society can improve its well-being by adopting an anti-consumerist lifestyle. Curtis’s theory is one tool that can help humanity achieve this goal. If we focus on our local resources and needs we will erase the profusion of valuable resources and the social inequality. Every one of us must realize that they are who they are and that their purchases do not shape their personalities. If we raise our heads from the piles of unnecessary products we will see that the world is wonderful. Happiness is not a brand; it is the consequence of a valuable life.

¹ Rees, W. Revisiting “Carrying Capacity: Area-Based Indicators of Sustainability”. Population and Environment: A Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies Volume 17, Number 3, 1996 Human Sciences Press, Inc. <http://www.dieoff.org/page110.htm>

² Walker, A. “Richest 2% own 'half the wealth' BBC World Service, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/6211250.stm>

³ Curtis, F. “Ecolocalism and Sustainability.” Ecological Economics, 46 (2003), 2003 Elsevier Science, p.93, http://www.sciencedirect.com/science?_ob=ArticleURL&_udi=B6VDY-48TMHC8-1&_user=3809081&_rdoc=1&_fmt=&_orig=search&_sort=d&_view=c&_acct=C000061435&_version=1&_urlVersion=0&_userid=3809081&_md5=98d168372b2d8b349161b018d75a6f06

⁴ Curtis p.87