

EXCESSIVE CONSUMPTION AND THE CAPITALIST *MODUS VIVENDI*: DILEMMA BETWEEN FRUGALITY AND DEVELOPMENT

CONSUMO EXCESSIVO E O MODUS VIVENDI CAPITALISTA: CÔMPITOS ENTRE A FRUGALIDADE E O DESENVOLVIMENTO

Article received in: 11/ 09/2021

Article accepted in: 09/22/2023

André Studart Leitão*

*Centro Universitário Christus (UNICHRISTUS), Fortaleza/CE, Brazil

Lattes: <http://lattes.cnpq.br/8110407668631447>

Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9681-943X>

andrestudart@gmail.com

Paulo Rogério Marques de Carvalho**

**Universidade Federal do Ceará (UFC), Fortaleza/CE, Brazil

Lattes: <http://lattes.cnpq.br/9296344304585305>

Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5567-1800>

paulo.carvalho@ufc.br

Pedro Alexandre Barbosa***

*** Advocacia-Geral da União (AGU), Procuradoria Federal, Fortaleza/CE, Brazil

Lattes: <http://lattes.cnpq.br/8320286402152814>

Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6392-2537>

pedroamb@gmail.com

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Abstract

Based on the understanding that human beings have diverse interests and aspirations, liberal ideals preach the coexistence and harmonization of different conceptions of a good life, assuming that each person seeks the one that best suits their particular utopia. Contemporary society, however, encourages a specific model of existence focused on consumption, presenting it as the ideal aspiration for individuals and a means to induce economic development.

Resumo

A partir da compreensão de que os seres humanos têm interesses e aspirações diversos, ideais liberais pregam a coexistência e a harmonização de diferentes concepções de uma boa vida, admitindo que cada pessoa busque aquela que mais se adeque a sua utopia particular. A sociedade contemporânea, entretanto, incentiva um modelo específico de existência, voltado para o consumo, apresentando-o como a aspiração ideal para os indivíduos e um meio para induzir o desenvolvimento



New needs are constantly created through the exhortation to dissatisfaction and desire, generating an endless cycle of demand, discard and replacement. The damage resulting from excessive consumption is demonstrated, emphasizing, in closing, that a lifestyle based on conscious consumption is fully compatible with development and must be encouraged, based on an ethics of consumption that is adequate to modern conceptions of human development, promoting a sustainable society. The methodology used in this article is qualitative, based on the analysis of documents and specialized bibliography.

Keywords: consumption; development; lifestyle; sustainability.

econômico. Novas necessidades são criadas constantemente, exortando a insatisfação e o desejo, gerando um ciclo infundável de demanda, descarte e substituição. Demonstrem-se os prejuízos decorrentes do consumo excessivo, salientando, em arremate, que um estilo de vida baseado em consumo consciente é plenamente compatível com o desenvolvimento. Portanto, deve ser fomentado a partir de uma ética de consumo adequada às concepções modernas de desenvolvimento humano, promovendo uma sociedade sustentável. A metodologia empregada neste artigo é qualitativa, baseada em análise de documentos, bem como em bibliografia especializada.

Palavras-chave: consumo; desenvolvimento; modos de vida; sustentabilidade.

Introduction

In the decades following the Industrial Revolution, the main economic thinkers seemed to agree that the future of humanity would be marked by a significant reduction in working hours. As a result, life would be full of idle time, with the possibility of greater dedication to leisure.

This scenario was not borne out. While productivity has indeed been accelerated by automation, the result of this growth has been unevenly distributed across social strata, so that poverty and hunger are still a reality in much of the world. Individuals in the labor market are pressured to consume more. Work is glorified as a form of obtaining material means, which would be the source of human satisfaction. In turn, consumption has become the driving force behind development. Human suffering and anguish seem to have no relevance to such system, which follows its continuous cycle of creating dissatisfaction in order to provoke desire and motivate people to keep its gears moving.

This article aims at carrying out a critical analysis of this reality and its consequences, verifying the suitability of this way of life for social objectives. It also seeks to investigate whether those who dare to tread a different path from that imposed by the consumer society actually harm the economy and human development.

To achieve this goal, it begins with the liberal ideas that culminated in the concept of *modus vivendi*, according to which different conceptions of the good life are considered legitimate, and it is up to each person to search for their own particular utopia. It also revisits the Enlightenment debate on a life based on the cultivation of luxury, especially with Rousseau and Mandeville. Then it takes a descriptive look at the contemporary consumerist dystopia and its respective picture of destiny, considering its successes and failures.

The next topic is dedicated to analyzing the myth that excessive consumption is fundamental to boosting the economy and leading to development. The article points out the unsustainability of a way of life that is making humanity sick and depleting the planet's natural resources. We aim to show that economic strategies and indicators favor goals far removed from the search for a better quality of life and the expansion of personal capacities.

Finally, we highlight the advantages for humanity of a lifestyle that prioritizes both reducing consumption and the need for a change in consumer ethics, in line with Amartya Sen's concept of development. In short, the aim of this article is to investigate whether contemporary life focused on consumption is moving away from the (utopian) goal of yesteryear: to build a more just, fraternal, and supportive society, which helps human beings in their personal project of seeking happiness.

1 Excessive consumption, work, *modus vivendi* and frugality

John Locke's and Adam Smith's analyses of the category of work are briefly discussed in the context of a debate on freedom, property, and consumption. Locke's thought is representative of the development of modern democratic theory, based on the premise of an inseparable union between property and freedom. In Locke's view, the right to property is one of the natural inalienable individual rights—just like life, liberty, and resistance—which, if violated, could be claimed against the offender and the state itself. In his view, the concept of property is broad, not limited to material goods, but to a set of essential goods and rights that the individual has always possessed or acquired in the state of society. Locke included in the concept of individual property everything that is the fruit of the “labor of the body” and the “work of the hands” For Locke, everything that man, from the state that nature has provided, “he hath mixed his labour with, and joined to it something that is his own, and thereby makes it his property” (LOCKE, 1973, p. 73). And “for this labour being the unquestionable property of

the labourer, no man but he can have a right to what that is once joined to, at least where there is enough, and as good, left in common for others” (LOCKE, 1973, p. 73). In other words, freedom implies the right of man to dispose exclusively of his person and, as his work is the property of his personality, the fruits of this work are also part of this property.

Adam Smith, the theoretical reference of economic-liberal thought, saw in the historical “age of commerce” the critical awareness of progress through consumption as the gravitational center of economic activity and the encouragement of production as the basis for the promotion of political economy. Smith’s pragmatic-political position, based on “natural liberty” and the valorization of people as consumers, were presuppositions for the exclusion of state intervention in the economy, which should be on the margins of political initiatives. Collective well-being would result from the meeting, directed by the *invisible hand*, between demand, supply, and individual interests. Smith’s (1999) justification for the capacity to produce surplus, which comes from the productivity that the division of labor produces, is based on three factors: the specialization of workers, the saving of time and finally the development of machines, which facilitate and reduce work when driven by one of these workers. The division of labor would be the maximum expression of how man is naturally and exclusively prone to exchange, reflected in the capacity for consumption.

The capacity of commerce in the 17th and 18th centuries challenged the classic theses condemning excessive consumption, intellectually legitimizing the new perspectives on consumption. Bernard Mandeville’s controversial “Fable of the bees” (1924) made him the target of an inquiry. Voltaire (1909) and his defense of luxury, in texts from 1736 to 1774, provided the bourgeoisie with intellectual justifications for civilized happiness through consumption. Rousseau’s writings on consumerism argued that divided labor and industry would generate slavery and, at the same time, awaken new needs. Conversely, Montesquieu, Hume, Ferguson, and Mandeville argued, each in their own way, that it is the enthusiasm for enrichment and the desire for luxury that drives work. For Rousseau, according to studies by Gonçalves (2012), among the forms of slavery is the way in which primitive and modern man distinguish themselves through the cultivation of luxury. From there, Rousseau made his ode to simplicity as a human ideal, a way of living a frugal life with a balance between restraint and abundance.

Magnificent luxury, distinguished from that which is necessary for human

well-being, elegance, grace, and comfort, would be like a slavery to the superfluous and to the greed of the gaze of others. And so, to the extent that people do not live for themselves, those who bow to false needs and indolence that magnificent luxury provokes become slaves to others. This dimension can be seen in *The New Heloise* (1994), which praises frugality and criticizes the accumulation of goods and the unproductive idleness that luxury produces. For Rousseau (1999, p. 205): “Such is luxury, [...] born of the idleness and vanity of men”. And in his *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts*, the issue is addressed more expressly, condemning luxury even as a symbolic form of distinction between the “masters” and the “workers”.

Luxury corrupts everything, both the rich who enjoy it and the poor who covets it. Wearing lace cuffs, embroidered clothes and an enameled case cannot be said to be evil in themselves. But it is a great evil to take advantage of these trifles, to consider those who possess them happy, and to devote time and labor that every man owes to nobler goals in order to put himself in a position to acquire similar ones (ROUSSEAU, 1999, p. 255; our translation).

[...]

The money that circulates between the hands of the rich and the artists to meet their superfluities is lost for the subsistence of the worker; the latter has no clothes, precisely because the masters need trimmings. Just the waste of the elements that enter into the nourishment of men is enough to make luxury odious to humanity (ROUSSEAU, 1999, p. 267; our translation).

The importance of the debate between Mandeville and Rousseau is highlighted by the debate on consumption. While Rousseau’s theses on frugality focused on how consumers should behave economically, Mandeville focused on how people will behave. The internal logic of capitalism rules out the debate on ethical norms of frugality, as it is based on the expansion of individual consumption, so they only are of interest for economic study if they are framed as references to the effects of this behavior on the economic level. Currently, a number of theoretical economists have returned to pre-modern philosophy, recovering ethical debates for the economy, such as Galbraith’s “abundant society” (2023) or Schumacher’s “small is beautiful” (1982), which took up elements of the duality between consumption and frugality to defend their distributist economic theses.

Contemporary Western economic regimes are the result of a long process of transformation, a direct outcome of European and American liberal revolutions, influenced by Enlightenment thinkers. This process was stimulated by the ideal of liberal tolerance, which brought with it an incalculable contribution to improving human well-being.

For Gray (2011), however, liberal tolerance brought with it an internal inconsistency: on the one hand, it defended that a rational consensus on the best way of life for individuals is possible; on the other, it admits the coexistence of different ways of life in which human development and prosperity were viable. Thus, for the British writer, liberalism has always had two faces, depending on its purpose.

The first one was defended by philosophers such as John Locke, John Rawls, and Friedrich Hayek, who dealt with the search for an ideal way of life, in which liberal institutions are considered to be an application of universal principles. According to Gray (2011), John Locke did not relativize the idea of a universal truth when he defended religious tolerance. By preaching flexibility in favor of atheists and Catholics, he hoped that they would sooner or later share the rational consensus that would consecrate Protestantism as the path of lucidity and reason.

The other side of liberal tolerance concerns coexistence, dealing with the attempt to pacify different ways of life, as a means of living together without belligerence. The exponents of this perspective are Thomas Hobbes, David Hume, Isaiah Berlin, and Michael Oakeshott. According to Gray (2011), Hobbes did not see a single religious or moral path as the expression of absolute truth, so he defended tolerance as the primary objective for achieving social pacification.

In order to better understand the aforementioned currents of thought, it is necessary to analyze the concepts of philosophical absolutism and relativism. Philosophical absolutism believes in absolute, universal truths and values that are independent of the individual. It therefore believes in the existence of perfection. In the religious field, it tends towards monotheism. Its adherents believe that the function of human knowledge is merely to reflect what exists, so that heteronomous laws govern the cognitive process.

On the other hand, philosophical relativism understands the cognitive process as the creation of the object. The freedom of the cognizing subject is therefore a fundamental prerequisite. This does not mean that the cognitive process is arbitrary. There are laws that govern it, which originate in the human mind. Relativism avoids both solipsism and pluralism by considering the mutual relationship among various subjects and the object of knowledge.

Kelsen (2003) stated that philosophical absolutism and relativism tend to flow into their respective political counterparts. In the first case, this occurred to the extent that the relationship between subject and object of knowledge is very similar to that of the subject with the absolute government, which is not influenced by the governed. Philosophical absolutism used to be applied as an

ideological tool by political absolutism, legitimizing the unlimited power of the ruler by giving him a supreme and superhuman character. On the other hand, Kelsen understood that democracy has a parallel in philosophical relativism. Both are governed by freedom and equality. Throughout history, metaphysical philosophers (Plato, St. Thomas Aquinas, Dante Alighieri, Hegel) tended towards political absolutism, while relativists were supporters of democracy (Democritus, Spinoza, Leibniz, Hume, Kant, Locke).

If there is an absolute value, there would be no point in following a majority of ignorant people. Antagonistic value judgments would not be logically or morally possible. Democratic principles, therefore, are based precisely on the absence of an absolute solution. They admit that today's wrong may be tomorrow's right, which is why the minority should have the right to spread their ideas.

Returning to the idea of tolerance, democratic societies must accept that the values of their individuals need not be identical. It is the institutions that need to be common and allow for different ways of life. Differences are not the result of the fragility of reason. Indeed, they embody the fact that human beings have their reasons for living differently.

This gives rise to the idea of *modus vivendi*, supported by the ethical theory of value pluralism (GRAY, 2011), which admits the possibility of moral knowledge and is not to be confused with more usual forms of skepticism, subjectivism, or ethical relativism. The pluralism of values does not mean that any conception of the good should be accepted, but it does force people to abandon the traditional notion of truth in ethics.

In an era marked by the strong influence of globalization, in which new technologies, information exchange and multilateral trade modify and amalgamate the various local and regional cultures, people adopt increasingly diverse practices, without accepting submission to customary impositions. The *modus vivendi* emerges as an expression of liberal ideas, allowing everyone to pursue their own particular utopia, which can only be pursued in a scenario of substantive freedoms. In the words of Sen (2010):

Development requires the removal of major sources of unfreedom: poverty as well as tyranny, poor economic opportunities as well as systematic social deprivation, neglect of public facilities as well as intolerance or overactivity of repressive states (SEN, 2011, p. 11).

Conversely, tolerance is a building process that requires vigilance against authoritarian impulses.

2 The conception of good life imposed by the consumer society

As a person browses the internet, advertisements pop up on their computer screen, alternately offering them books that do not interest them and models of oil-less fryers that they may have been looking for the week before. On television, the streaming platform interrupts the video at a crucial moment to show a commercial of a 4x4 vehicle. Suddenly, the internet user realizes that they have missed the last few minutes of the film they were watching, turning their thoughts between a drive along the beach and the cost-effectiveness of a 47-inch television.

The average citizens' day-to-day life is infested with overt or implicit offers of products and services that, until then, were unaware that they needed. Advertisements are disguised in the most diverse ways, making it impossible to escape them. The line between ads and news is becoming increasingly blurred. Is the digital influencer criticizing or offering a product? Has the camera focused on the brand of alkaline ionized water filter in the TV show couple's house, or is it just the viewers' mind playing tricks? In the blink of an eye, it is over.

In Bauman's (2008) pessimistic-realistic analysis, contemporary liquid society has transfigured individuals into commodities. In this sense, people are no longer part of a collective centered on production, but a society of consumerism. The new order is dictated by consumption, which has replaced work as the core element.

Still according to the Polish sociologist, the consumer society has its driving force in constant dissatisfaction, searching for desires that are never satisfied. In order to keep the mechanism functioning, it is necessary to constantly create new desires, even if they are artificial and fleeting, which are soon replaced by other desires, human beings in a permanent sense of emptiness, which can only be filled by some material good. Needs are no longer part of people and their nature but are presented exogenously until they are absorbed. Frustration is therefore essential to the economy of contemporary liquid society. In a similar vein, Marques (2012) highlights that currently freedom and human dignity are concepts directly linked to active participation in the market as consumers, in a phenomenon he defines as "economic-social citizenship".

Harari (2015) admits that capitalism has significantly reduced the scarcity that has dominated humanity for almost its entire existence. However, the historian shares Bauman's view of the modern consumer society as he mentions that the economic model, aided by popular psychology, has worked hard to convert indulgence into something positive. The task has been so successful that

shopping has become a family pastime and the main way of celebrating religious holidays, whose original functions have been lost in time.

The center of production of goods and services of the modern machinery industries is resignified by the intellectual industries and information networks. According to Masuda (1984), the information society (qualified as “computopia” as opposed to the “literacy” of the industrial phase) is governed by a principle of “synergetic feedback” searching for the well-being of humanity; not by a system of seeking equilibrium between supply and demand. Masuda’s computopia is based on the optimism of a renaissance of “teleological synergy” as a result of an awareness of the limitations of technology and that the power of information production would reduce dependence on subsistence work. Thus, all people interconnected by the global knowledge network would resume the search for their needs for personal fulfillment (happiness) and world peace. In an advanced state of computopia, industrial society’s culture of mass consumption would be replaced by a massive creation of knowledge and appreciation of time.

All of this is enhanced in a scenario where binary data stored in the “cloud” provides large conglomerates with information about the interests and desires—including the most secret ones—of each user of digital services, as shown in the docudrama *The Social Dilemma* (USA, 2020). Algorithms classify people into groups of potential buyers of academic books and oilless fryers. Having a real window into the souls of their targets, companies offer products apparently customized according to preferences and idiosyncrasies, just a click away, making irrational and impulsive choices even easier.

Products are programmed to last just long enough to fill a sudden craving, until they are replaced by an updated version with some additional feature that the buyer may not know it exists (or how to use) until they exchange it for the next model, conveniently launched on the eve of a holiday that once symbolized brotherhood. Or have people been programmed to discard the product on a pre-defined date in favor of the one that will bring the dream of seasonal happiness?

Not even the body itself escapes the offer of solutions to previously non-existent problems. Aesthetic surgeries of all kinds take advantage of advertising that imposes an ideal body prototype. Thus, individual characteristics are merely defects that need to be adjusted to this standardization. Dissatisfaction and potential satisfaction sold in a single opportunity.

The technology and creativity fostered by the capitalist world have undeniably made modern life easier in many ways. Life expectancy is increasing all over the planet (ROSER; ORTIZ-OSPINA; RITCHIE, 2019). Diseases that

were previously fatal are treated with affordable medicines. As far as everyday life is concerned, expensive telegrams, once used for rapid communication, have become obsolete in the face of the speed and cost of emails and multi-platform applications. Videoconferences, which were part of the utopian imagination of children watching futuristic cartoons in the 1980s, are now commonplace for your children. A camcorder, which once cost the price of a semi-new car, is now in the palm of every smartphone owner's hand, as are GPS, music and movie players, newspapers, and study materials. Banking transactions and income tax returns, which a few years ago consumed considerable time and mental effort, have been reduced to small fractions of a hassle, spent without the need to leave the comfort of home.

While the world has achieved technological advances that should make life lighter, more fluid, and free of obligations, people are suffering from depression and anxiety (SANTOMAURO *et al.*, 2021) like never before. Technology has reduced the time to conduct everyday activities and, paradoxically, individuals seem to have less time to devote to what gives them pleasure, taking care of their physical and mental health and devoting themselves to family and loved ones.

At the same time, the consumerist lifestyle produces waste at an increasing rate (KAZA *et al.*, 2018), destroys ecosystems, extinguishes species, causes pollution, and changes the planet's climate (MASSON-DELMOTTE *et al.*, 2018). Food production generates deforestation, the suffering of other species and, in an inefficient equation, uses three-quarters of the world's arable land for grazing and feed production, directing a growing population of non-human animals to an amount of grain that would be enough to extinguish hunger across the globe (FOLEY; RAMANKUTTY; BRAUMAN, 2011).

Indifferent to all this, people continue to follow the same path, seeking happiness in consumption, believing that the next releases will finally bring the satisfaction that the last purchase was unable to provide.

3 Does unbridled consumption lead to development?

For Harari (2015), the high rates of obesity found in today's world represent a double victory for consumerism. It means that people are eating more than they need to and also buying diet products, contributing twice to the growth of the economy.

Data from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) attributes the growth of Brazil's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2019 to

household consumption, a factor responsible for the recovery of the economy after the devastation caused by the Covid-19 pandemic (SARAIVA, 2020; VILLAS BOAS, 2020). According to the IBGE, consumption accounts for 65% of the national GDP.

So far, everything points to the mission and meaning of life for the man of the new millennium being translated into consumption. The tragicomic story of the human species reaches the present act, a dystopian anticlimax in which the protagonist finds himself enslaved by the system he has created, in a vicious circle in which emptiness, search, ephemeral satisfaction and frustration alternate. And those who have grown tired of the game and are looking for a way out of this dependency are nothing more than selfish people who have abandoned the oars of the great ship of sugar and antidepressant consumers, heading towards economic progress.

However, Reisman and Horwitz (2017) stated that the destination does not seem so bleak. Both criticize economic policies adopted by national governments in recent decades, which have mainly taken the form of stimulus packages primarily aimed at boosting consumption. According to the authors a healthy economy presupposes favorable conditions for entrepreneurs to produce and create wealth. The source of this wealth would therefore be centered on production, not consumption. In order to finance production, it would be essential for people and companies to save enough. In such a scenario, there would be more funds available for borrowing, reducing interest rates and enabling long-term investments.

Consumption is usually stimulated by allocating government resources to consumers, resources that come from producers. Thus, emphasizing consumerism results in an artificial incentive to the detriment of production, job creation and the value of wages. Consumers, therefore, cannot and should not bear the responsibility for industrial and economic development, which would characterize a reversal of the order of market flow. Consumers' wants and needs will not be met if entrepreneurs do not invest their accumulated capital in the production of the respective goods. Consumption is the final stage of the process and cannot be stimulated at the expense of savings, thus reducing the supply of capital available to the producer.

In a similar vein, Coelho (2013) stated that the individual's production precedes consumption, insofar as payment for work will be used to obtain goods. The transformation and addition of value to goods result from investments, for which savings are indispensable. Thus, consumption in isolation does not result in production or jobs, and it is not possible to say that stimulating consumption

leads to economic growth.

Another aspect that cannot be forgotten when discussing the glamorization of consumption is the fact that natural resources are finite, so each generation has the responsibility of not depleting or making them precarious, thus they can be used by future generations.

In the 18th century, Thomas Robert Malthus analyzed population growth and the progression of food production and warned of the risk of natural resources being depleted by human beings. Currently, the British institute New Economics Foundation, in collaboration with the Global Footprints Network, works with the concept of Earth Overshoot, calculating every year the date when the demand for renewable natural resources exceeds what the planet is capable of producing in a year (overshoot day). The data collected shows that the reserve of these resources has been progressively reduced. While Earth Overshoot Day occurred on December 29th in 1970, in 2019 it already happened on July 29th, 2019 (PAST EARTH..., 2020).

The year 2020 proved to be an exception to this trend. The institute calculated the day of depletion on August 22, indicating a decrease of approximately 10% in the expenditure of natural resources and their survival for more than three weeks compared to the previous year. This shows that the reduction in consumption caused by the COVID-19 epidemic—when people were forced to cut back on superfluous spending—resulted in positive environmental side effects.

Such effects have also been felt without any major methodological difficulties in various parts of the world. Without the massive and predatory presence of man, the once dark waters of Venice have become crystal clear, and large Chinese urban centers have lost the characteristic gray air resulting from excessive carbon emissions (BRAUN, 2020). Therefore, we can (and should) follow a different path, one that is sustainable, with less waste and pollution, giving hope to future generations that they will have enough resources to develop, bringing the well-being promised (and not always fulfilled) by the consumerist society.

4 Impacts of a frugal way of life on the economy and human development

Concern about the negative effects of unbridled consumption has led to a growing awareness of the need to avoid waste and prioritize the production of energy and consumer goods that use and have been manufactured using renewable resources. Sectors of government and civil society have been engaged in this task.

At the same time, consumer pressure from contemporary culture, mass access

to credit and aggressive advertising has led families into over-indebtedness, which is akin to the civil death of its members (MARQUES, 2012).

But what about the negative impacts of reducing excessive consumption? Would human development be harmed by the lack of stimulus, which would lead to less production? Harari (2015) mentions the apparent clash of values between the impositions made by the consumer society and the option for a simple lifestyle, stating that, for the contemporary consumer society, “frugality is a disease to be cured”.

Bregman (2018) criticizes the means used by governments to measure the economy for not covering important elements of what constitutes development. He contends that the concept of Gross Domestic Product played an important role in the post-war period by cataloguing and systematizing a series of data that made it possible to measure progress and adequately plan public policies and resource allocation, guiding economic efforts. However, the formula used does not accurately reflect human development today. A series of relevant issues, such as air purity, volunteer work, time spent by parents on education and caring for their children are left out, even though they have greater economic relevance than the variables that are included in the calculation. Century-old trees do not enter the equation until they are felled, and their wood sold. Furthermore, GDP is favorably impacted by a series of negative factors. In this sense, the Dutch writer points out:

Traffic jams, drug addictions, adultery? Gold mines for gas stations, rehabilitation centers and divorce lawyers. If you were the GDP, your ideal citizen would be a compulsive gambler with cancer who is going through a complicated divorce, from which he seeks solace by taking several antidepressant pills and shopping madly on Black Friday (BREGMAN, 2011, p. 81).

Bresser-Pereira (2014) explains that it is important to distinguish between economic growth and human development, pointing out that the former can be unfair or offend the environment, while the latter cannot. This is because, although economic growth usually results in improved living conditions, human development encompasses other political objectives, such as security, equality and political participation, social equality, and environmental development.

According to Sen (2011), development is related to the expansion of individual freedoms and improvement in the quality of life that can be enjoyed. These factors are closely linked to real opportunities available to people, considering social and individual circumstances. Therefore, poverty results not only from a low level of income, but also from a lack of basic capabilities.

Thus, the impact of choosing a certain way of life must be assessed not only from the classic economic traditions and concepts centered on income, such as GDP. This is not to disregard the importance of such measurements. It is just that they do not quantify freedoms and quality of life and are insufficient, even if relevant, to direct people choices.

In defending the project of a universal basic income, Parijs (2014) highlighted the option for a simple, leisure-oriented way of life. In an article with the suggestive title “*Por que os surfistas devem ser alimentados*” (Why surfers should be fed), the philosopher and economist mentions that, at a time when involuntary unemployment is not extinct, people who chooses to give up paid work—whether to help someone in need, dedicate themselves to the arts or due to any other reason—is opting to renounce to a scarce resource and should receive a share derived from this transaction they are making with society. Thus, liberal justice is achieved, insofar as a real environment of freedom is created to realize the individual’s conception of a good life. He then concludes that if there is an unfair distribution of society’s resources, it does not favor those who opt for low production and consumption, but the ones who take advantage of the few attractive jobs.

It is important to clarify that people who adopt a frugal or minimalist lifestyle do not want to avoid consumption, but rather its excesses. In order for human beings to develop their capacities properly, they need to eat, have decent housing, access to health, education and culture. In a society in which knowledge of the human community is ever greater and that of the individual is increasingly reduced to their area of specialization, it is inevitable and salutary to resort to exchange relationships (HARARI, 2015). Therefore, the aim is to regain volitional control of consumption, without falling into the advertising traps that induce people to identify the product or service as a fraction of their desired happiness. It should be noted that major economic crises, such as the one in 2008, were caused by indebtedness and the depletion of domestic savings, which resulted from an excess, not an absence, of consumption (GUTTMANN and PLIHON, 2021).

Bertrand Russell (2002) points out that work is a virtue that should not be valued as an end in itself, but as a means of obtaining free time to spend in a constructive and pleasurable way. He recalls that, historically, a privileged class that had unfair advantages was able, with their idle time, to create what was best, developing the sciences and the arts. Life for work does not allow for the possibility of properly enjoying those pleasures that the creative leisure of others has provided. Morality, for the philosopher, would indicate a distribution of work

in which each individual worked only enough to obtain a satisfactory income. As a consequence, periods of rest and enjoyment would increase, while more people would be included in the labor market.

According to Bregman (2018), the most influential economists of different ideological views in the 19th and early 20th centuries, such as Karl Marx, John Maynard Keynes, and John Stuart Mill, predicted that automation would bring a life full of leisure and pleasure in the near future. Human beings would be able to devote themselves to what brings them satisfaction and happiness, with production left to the efficiency of machines without worrying about directing a large part of their time and efforts to producing and obtaining material resources.

The modern world has brought facilities that would make it unrecognizable to someone who lived a century ago. Communication, information, transportation, file storage and banking are just a few examples of modern conveniences. It is hard to find aspects of everyday life that have not been directly impacted by technological innovations and the mass production resulting from automation. However, this has not led to leisure. People work harder to satisfy the needs created by the market. In fact, the very idea of need has changed over time. In the past, consumption stemmed from need. Now, need stems from consumption. You only find out that a certain technology is necessary after it has been created and widely disseminated through advertising mechanisms, including social networks. If digital influencers use it, everyone wants to use it.

A new consumer ethic is needed. If people want—and must—leave a healthy and balanced environment for future generations and if they want to have a full and meaningful existence, they need indicators that reflect these goals and replace the consumer culture with a culture of happiness (in the broad sense).

Sustainability involves reducing consumption, reusing, recycling, and disposing of things properly. To achieve this, an educational process is essential, aimed at reducing waste and preparing human beings to differentiate between real need and the imposition of consumer society. This change in behavior must not only come from the consumer, but also involve the productive class, advertisers, and government. Precisely for this reason, the fight against planned obsolescence, promotion of energy generation from renewable and clean sources, preference for small local producers, reduction of plastic and use of biodegradable materials are examples of practices that need to be disseminated.

As previously mentioned, *modus vivendi* is based on the ethical theory of value pluralism (GRAY, 2011). It is based on the idea that there is no universal ethical truth and therefore no single reasonable conception of the good life. On

the other hand, if it does not follow the traditional idea of truth in ethics, it admits that some concepts can be considered wrong. A system prioritizing a lifestyle that depletes resources, threatens fauna and flora, worsens mental health indices and disregards factors related to happiness does not deserve to fall within the broad limits of tolerance, and must urgently be adapted to principles that privilege individual freedoms and the improvement of the quality of life of the people.

Conclusion

Contemporary society directs individuals' aspirations towards consumption, with promises—not always kept—of happiness and assuaging anguishes. As well as being idealized as an instrument for human satisfaction, shopping is also necessary to stimulate economic development, providing innovation and progress.

Despite the undoubted advances made in various areas of knowledge, which prolong and make life easier for human beings, excessive consumption causes harm of all kinds. Finite natural resources are being exploited in a predatory and unsustainable way, producing more and more garbage, pollution and waste. At the same time, consumption is encouraged by stimulating a constant feeling of deprivation, which leads people to shop, but also to mental pathologies such as depression and anxiety.

Opting for a low-consumption lifestyle, in addition to avoiding such harm, brings advantages to the economy, as it stimulates the formation of savings that avoid indebtedness and finance the productive sector. In addition, development, understood as an increase in the individual's capacities and an improvement in the quality of life—as conceived by Amartya Sen—cannot be measured only by income, goods, and services, but indicators should reflect what should be the primary purpose of all human activities: the attainment of happiness.

The increase in productive efficiency caused by automation gives us hope of a lighter life, with more time dedicated to leisure. The pace of contemporary life shows that, at some point, society deviated from this path, working more in search of pleasures promised in advertising campaigns. It is necessary to establish a new consumerist ethic that, instead of seeking insistent dissatisfaction in human beings, focuses on their real needs in order to develop and be happy.

References

- BAUMAN, Z. *Vida para consumo: a transformação das pessoas em mercadoria*. Rio de Janeiro: Zahar, 2008.
- BRAUN, J. Quarentenas e restrições reduzem poluição na Itália, China e em NY. *Véja*, São Paulo, march 23, 2020. Available from: <https://veja.abril.com.br/mundo/quarentenas-e-restricoes-reduzem-poluicao-na-italia-china-e-em-ny/>. Access on: Dec. 31, 2020.
- BREGMAN, R. *Utopia para realistas*. Rio de Janeiro: Sextante, 2018.
- BRESSER-PEREIRA, L. C. Desenvolvimento, progresso e crescimento econômico. *Lua Nova*, São Paulo, n. 93, p. 33-60, 2014.
- COELHO, D. O consumo é o motor da economia? *IL Blog*, 9 ago. 2013. Available from <https://www.institutoliberal.org.br/blog/o-consumo-e-o-motor-da-economia/>. Access on: Dec. 31, 2020.
- FOLEY, J. *et al.* Solutions for a cultivated planet. *Nature*, London, n. 478, p. 337-342, oct. 2011. Available from: <https://www.nature.com/articles/nature10452>. Access on: Dec. 30, 2020.
- GALBRAITH, J. K. *A sociedade da abundância*. Lisboa: Almedina, 2023.
- GONÇALVES, M. F. Considerações sobre o luxo e a frugalidade em Rousseau. *Revista Estudos Filosóficos*, São João Del-Rei, n. 9, p. 56-67, 2012. Available from: <http://www.seer.ufsj.edu.br/estudosfilosoficos/article/view/2203>. Access on: Aug. 7, 2023
- GRAY, J. *A anatomia de Gray*. Rio de Janeiro: Record, 2011.
- GUTTMANN R.; PLIHON, D. O endividamento do consumidor no cerne do capitalismo conduzido pelas finanças. *Economia e Sociedade*, Campinas, v. 17, n. esp., p. 575-610, dec. 2008. Available from: <https://www.scielo.br/pdf/ecos/v17/nspe/04.pdf>. Access on: Jan. 2, 2021.
- HARARI, Y. N. *Sapiens: uma breve história da humanidade*. Porto Alegre: L&PM, 2015.
- KAZA, S. *et al.* What a waste 2.0: a global snapshot of solid waste management to 2050. *Overview Booklet*. Washington, DC: World Bank, 2018. Available from: <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/30317>. Access on: Dec. 30, 2020.
- KELSEN, H. *A democracia*. São Paulo: Martins Fontes, 2003.
- LOCKE, J. *Segundo tratado sobre o governo*. São Paulo: Abril Cultural, 1973.
- MANDEVILLE, B. *The fable of the bees: or private vices, public benefits*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924.
- MARQUES, C. L. Consumo como igualdade e inclusão social: a necessidade de uma lei especial para prevenir e tratar o “superendividamento” dos consumidores pessoas físicas. *Revista Jurídica da Presidência*, Brasília, DF, v. 13, n. 101, p. 405-424, oct. 2011/jan. 2012.
- MASSON-DELMOTTE, V. *et al.* *Global Warming of 1.5° C*: an IPCC special report on the impacts of global warming of 1.5° C above pre-industrial levels and related global greenhouse gas emission pathways, in the context of strengthening the global response to the threat of climate change, sustainable development, and efforts to eradicate poverty. Geneva: IPCC, 2018. Available from: https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/sites/2/2022/06/SR15_Full_Report_LR.pdf. Access on: Dec. 30, 2020.
- O DILEMA das redes. Direção: Jeff Orlowski. Produção: Larissa Rhodes. Roteiro: Vickie Curtis, Davis Coombe e Jeff Orlowski-Yang. Boulder: Exposure Labs, 2020 (94 min.). Available from: <https://www.netflix.com/br/title/81254224>. Access on: Sept. 22, 2023.

- PAST EARTH overshoot days. *Earth Overshoot Day*, 2020. Available from: <https://www.overshoot-day.org/newsroom/past-earth-overshoot-days/>. Access on: Dec. 31, 2020.
- REISMAN, G.; HORWITZ, S. O consumismo não gera crescimento econômico – e sua defesa é o cerne da teoria keynesiana. *Mises Brasil*, 21 jun. 2017. Available from: <https://mises.org.br/artigo/2223/o-consumismo-nao-gera-crescimento-economico-e-sua-defesa-e-o-cerne-da-teoria-keynesiana>. Access on: Dec. 31, 2020.
- ROSER, M.; ORTIZ-OSPINA, E.; RITCHIE, H. Life expectancy. *Our World in Data*, 2019. Available from: <https://ourworldindata.org/life-expectancy>. Access on: Dec. 30, 2020
- ROUSSEAU, J.-J. *Discurso sobre as ciências e as artes*. São Paulo: Nova Cultural, 1999.
- ROUSSEAU, J.-J. *Júlia ou a nova Heloísa*. Campinas: Educamp/Hucitec, 1994.
- RUSSELL, B. *Elogio ao ócio*. Rio de Janeiro: Sextante, 2002.
- SARAIVA, A.; ROSAS, R.; VASCONCELOS, G. Retomada na economia passa por recuperação no consumo das famílias, nota IBGE. *Valor Econômico*, dec. 3, 2020. Available from: <https://valor.globo.com/brasil/noticia/2020/12/03/retomada-na-economia-passa-por-recuperacao-no-consumo-das-familias-nota-ibge.ghtml>. Access on: Dec. 31, 2020.
- SCHUI, F. *Austerity: the great failure*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015.
- SCHUMACHER, E. F. O negócio é ser pequeno. *RAE – Revista de Administração de Empresas*, São Paulo, v. 22, n. 3, p. 68-69, 1982. Available from: <https://periodicos.fgv.br/rae/article/view/39470>. Access on: Aug. 24, 2023.
- SEN, A. *Desenvolvimento como liberdade*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2010.
- SANTOMAURO, D. F. *et al.* Global prevalence and burden of depressive and anxiety disorders in 204 countries and territories in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. *The Lancet*, London, v. 398, p. 1700-1712, nov. 6, 2021.
- SMITH, A. *Inquérito sobre a natureza e as causas da Riqueza das Nações*. Lisboa: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, 1999.
- VAN PARIJS, P. Por que os surfistas devem ser alimentados: o argumento liberal em defesa de uma renda básica incondicional. *Revista Brasileira de Ciência Política*, Brasília, DF, n. 15, p. 229-264, sept./dec. 2014. Available from: https://www.scielo.br/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0103-33522014000300229&lng=pt&tlng=pt. Access on: Dec. 28, 2020.
- VILLAS BOAS, B.; SARAIVA, A. Alta do PIB foi, de novo, ancorada no consumo das famílias, aponta IBGE. *Valor Econômico*, 4 abr. 2020. Available from: <https://valor.globo.com/brasil/noticia/2020/03/04/alta-do-pib-foi-de-novo-ancorada-no-consumo-das-familias-aponta-ibge.ghtml>. Access on: Dec. 31, 2020.
- VOLTAIRE. Défense du Mondain, ou l'apologie du luxe. In: MORIZE, A. *L'Apologie du Luxe au XVIII siècle. Étude critique sur Le Mondain et ses sources*. Paris: H. Didier, Libraire, 1909.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

André Studart Leitão

Post-Doctorate in Law from Universidade Presbiteriana Mackenzie, São Paulo/SP, Brazil. Post-Doctorate in Law from Universidade de Fortaleza (UNIFOR), Fortaleza/CE, Brazil. Post-Doctorate in Law from the Mediterranean International Center for Human Rights Research (MICHR), Reggio Di Calabria, Italy. PhD and Master in Law from Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo (PUC-SP), São Paulo/SP, Brazil. Graduated in Law from Universidade Federal do Ceará, Fortaleza/CE, Brazil.

Professor in the Master of Laws Program at the Centro Universitário Christus (UNICHRISTUS), Fortaleza/CE, Brazil. Professor at the Centro Universitário Farias Brito. Federal Prosecutor.

Paulo Rogério Marques de Carvalho

PhD in Legal and Political Sciences from Universidade de Lisboa (UL), Lisbon, Portugal, with a doctoral internship at the Facoltà di Giurisprudenza of Università degli studi di Roma “La Sapienza,” Rome, Italy. Master in Law and Development from Universidade Federal do Ceará (UFC), Fortaleza/CE, Brazil. Specialist in Labor Law and Procedure from the Instituto de Direito do Trabalho da UL. Graduated in Law from UFC. Adjunct Professor at UFC. Lawyer. Coordinator of the Coordenadoria de Legislação de Pessoal e Controle da Pró-Reitoria de Gestão de Pessoas at UFC.

Pedro Alexandre Barbosa

Master in Law from the Centro Universitário Christus, Fortaleza/CE, Brazil. Specialist in State Law from the Associação Educacional Unyahna, Barreiras/BA, Brazil. Specialist in Civil Procedural Law from Escola da Assembleia do Rio Grande do Norte, Natal/RN, Brazil. Graduated in Law from the Universidade Federal do Ceará (UFC), Fortaleza/CE, Brazil. Federal Prosecutor

Authors' participation

All authors discussed the results, reviewed, and approved the final paper.

How to cite this article (ABNT):

LEITÃO, A. S.; CARVALHO, P. R. M.; BARBOSA, P. A. Excessive consumption and the capitalist *modus vivendi*: dilemma between frugality and development. *Veredas do Direito*, Belo Horizonte, v. 20, e202428, 2023. Available from: <http://www.domhelder.edu.br/revista/index.php/veredas/article/view/2428>. Access on: Month. day, year.