



CONSUMPTION AS A TOOL FOR SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL RESPONSIBILITY AND FOR COMBATING POVERTY

Thinking before we act: A guide

Explanatory notes

In the consumer society, identity and life projects are based on consumption. A culture of “choice” and “difference” seems to be taking over from the culture of “equality” and “needs” which was a feature of the society of well-being (welfare state). Bauman has described the clash between the work ethic and the aesthetic of consumption. Under-consumption is thus becoming something almost “abnormal”, and the poorest people are frequently perceived as failed consumers, incapable of grasping the opportunities offered by the market. In addition, the balance between tax costs and social benefits is changing, with the former tending to be regarded as too high in relation to the latter, and the collective solidarity which involved public management is tending to break down as a result.

This guide is intended to look at consumption - and more responsible consumption in particular - from another angle, that of solidarity. This does not mean rejecting the duty of collective solidarity incumbent on the social state, but acknowledging instead that new areas for the expression of collective solidarity are vital in societies with a number of identities which take many and varied forms. These areas, which are created when consumption becomes both a political tool and an instrument for expressing responsibilities, since the choices concerned are made in an attempt to alter market or institutional practices which are not shared, may express new forms of inclusive and responsible social capital. For the most part, nevertheless, these forms are “institutions” which make it possible to pursue the interests of environmental or human rights protection, rather than means of expressing solidarity with the most vulnerable people, through the opening of integration paths freed from stigmatisation.

As well as examining responsible consumption as an expression of a growing awareness of the environmental and health risks stemming from excessive consumption, this guide will therefore investigate how the areas of collective action centring on political responsibility in the sphere of consumption can promote integration and create local social capital, cutting across economic and social differences.

The guide will be divided into four parts.

Part I – The meaning of consumption in societies based on the work ethic, as compared to those based on the aesthetic of consumption

This part is to be sub-divided into seven sections.

a. Consumption and democratisation. Setting out a historical view of the role of consumption in the process of democratisation and the claiming of political rights, acknowledging that consumption, in “producer societies” based on the work ethic, was a factor in democratisation, in the growing awareness of citizenship and in the concept of equality in relation to needs (Lucia Reich).

b. From citizen to consumer: with the affirmation of the “consumer society”, however, the role of consumer comes to take over from that of citizen in the definition of social and political identity. This also leads to a reduction in the degree to which political agreement exists on collective responsibility towards the poorest people.

c. Is “freedom of choice”, which defines a new hierarchy in the consumer society, a myth or a reality? A critical analysis of the fields in which such freedom is exercised shows that choice relates to “visible” aspects of the product or service, but not content, in terms of respect for rights and for the environment. Furthermore, extreme fragmentation of supply renders choice impossible (Sophie).

d. Definition of needs: how and by whom are needs defined? Who decides what is excessive? What role does advertising play in the definition of needs and choices? The redefinition of needs is a vital prerequisite for the building of any new responsibilities (Tim).

e. Determination of prices: in societies where the aesthetic of consumption overrides the work ethic and relationships with nature, the tendency is to overvalue some component parts, such as design, packaging and advertising, and to undervalue others, such as workers’ rights, environmental impact, etc. As well as the social and environmental imbalances caused, such price forming systems also suppress the concept of a fair price. Social polarisation ensues in the relation between price and satisfaction: on the one hand, the lower the price, the greater the satisfaction; on the other hand, the higher the price, the greater the satisfaction in terms of elitism, difference, uniqueness (Francesco).

f. Changes in the period of consumption and in relations with goods. In the consumer society, time speeds up, and the “slow” is second best to the “speedy”, while the relationship with actual space gives way to advertisement-generated “artificial proximities”. Thus links with goods become ephemeral, and the true meaning of the verb “consume”, defined in Collins English Dictionary as “use up” or “expend”, is actually lost. Types of obsolescence are studied, physical and psychological, as are the impediments to the durability of consumer goods, and the symbolic value of goods is scrutinised (Tim).

g. Consumption, which holds up a mirror to society, expresses its values, culture, differences, fragmentation. Poor people’s image is that of a group of “under-consumers” or “inferior consumers”, or of people unable to take advantage of the benefits offered by the market (Lucia).

Part II – Individual consumers and (individual and collective) well-being

This part is to be sub-divided into two sections.

a. Individual consumers' "concerns". Individual feelings of impotence and concern develop about increases in supply and the consequences of wrong decisions, as awareness grows of the consequences in terms of health, environment, injustice, malaise, etc. Preferring what is good rather than goods is an idea that is gaining ground (Federica/Marco).

b. Renewal of the concept of well-being. The well-being of the individual is indissociable from that of society. Social and environmental assets are part of the latter, as is the cultural and politico-institutional heritage, advantages which are all acquired by society collectively. The creation of well-being can but be part of a process of inclusive dialogue (Samuel) and of redefinition of, on the one hand, the concepts of shortage, scarcity and unavailability, which are associated with fear and frustration, and, on the other hand, those of abundance and plenty, which are associated with confidence (Nadia).

Part III – Consuming in order to ensure the well-being of all, including the most vulnerable, and increasing the heritage of well-being to be passed on to future generations

a. Reappropriating one's own choices and individual acts: a different way of "being". Breaking the usual patterns of consumption. Creating the conditions for a change of "culture" enabling individual freedom of choice to be exercised responsibly (Tim Jackson?):

- consuming less, consuming better, so as to protect health and quality of life (Francesco);
 - consuming in a way which respects human rights (Federica);
 - consuming in a way which respects the environment and future generations. The ecological footprint, the treatment of waste (René);
 - "valuing" goods and becoming aware of the mechanisms which lead to them being "undervalued" (Tim);
 - expressing a preference for the local level (Marco);
 - rejecting harmful and unnecessary goods which have been transported too far (Tim).
- Tackling the subject of fair trade and transport.

b. Creating collective spaces for the definition of consumption criteria and for the practice of solidarity: "belonging" differently, making consumption a political tool and an instrument of inclusion.

- dealing with excessive fragmentation through collective organisation of choices (René);
- becoming co-producers, predefining the characteristics of the consumer good and the production chain (Marco);
- making pricing and ethics compatible, including the most vulnerable in collective action (as for the poorest people, are they, too, required to be consistent?) (Sophie);
- creating local jobs by generating consumer loyalty (Daniel);
- using money and time differently (Nadia);

- making use of the local level to communicate, to share goods and to choose: personalising relations centring on consumption: “passa-parola”;
- giving producers a “face”, especially those who are most vulnerable (Christophe);
- creating democratic conditions of access to quality (Lucia Reich).

Part IV – Tools, roles and levers for choosing well-being for all

- Teaching people, from a very young age, not to be a “market player”, but to be a “responsible global player” instead (Jean Huet).
- Labels, seals of approval, product comparisons, etc, to rectify the asymmetry affecting information: advantages and limitations (René).
- Increasing the numbers of “intelligent intermediaries”: obtaining the commitment of all who are able, through argument, to convert those around them to collective acts of responsible and inclusive consumption (doctors, associations, teachers, media, etc).
- Role of public authorities and the tax system?
- Ethical finance for responsible consumption.
- Setting up of flexible systems for collecting and disseminating experience, creation of closer relations between research and practitioners’ networks, advisory bodies - information available to all (on line, via the Web, information counters), testing new kinds of synergy with public authorities, especially at local level (Pauline).

One concluding thought:

- In a society keen on sobriety, are the poorest people not pioneers, rather than “inferior consumers”? (Francesco)