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**UNLIMITED CONSUMPTION AND CONSUMPTION LIMITS:  
REFLECTIONS ON CONSUMER DUALISM**

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*Abstract*

The article deals with the issue of consumption in modern society. Social changes influence human needs. Based on the analysis of researches, the article describes two different approaches (economic and sociological) to consumption. The article argues that consumption is a human adaptation mechanism to changes of the world. The article also touches upon the issue of responsible and irresponsible consumption of different resources. Philosophers and economists argue that a man is constantly striving to satisfy unlimited wants. There are different economic laws which declare limitlessness and infinity of human wants (e.g., the Engel's law). The sustainable development model cannot change current consumption patterns because it assumes that human desires are limited, but the human experience demonstrates that inability to satisfy human needs leads to social stagnation. Thus, one can conclude that the modern society is not socially responsible. It is facing a dilemma: responsible behavior vs. irresponsible behavior. One of the ways out is to satisfy human needs through social networks (communication, joint purchasing, etc.). A search for the golden mean should take into account the social role of consumption as an adaptation mechanism and the role of the society in formation of human desires. However, this model also disregards consumption limits - overconsumption and underconsumption - which need to be eliminated. Fundamental changes in the consumption model could solve the problem.

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## 1. Introduction

Currently, all forms and activities of the human society are changing and being transformed. Taking into account this fact, it is necessary to reflect on the nature of a man and his needs. Can a man change with the changing world? Does a man become better or worse? Do his needs and desires change? How do they change if they ever change? Is a man the same as in the days of Socrates and Diogenes? Or is it necessary to look for a man in full daylight with a lamp?

At the close of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Peccei (1980) said that “all current disorders and crises are a cause and a consequence of inadaptability of humans to the reality”. Thus, he admitted that the world changed while the human remained the same. 40 years passed. What is different?

Generations live in cloven, use digital technologies and virtual spaces. However, obeying someone’s will, they go to war, live like barbaric pirates or medieval people. What forces them to change their lifestyles?

Should not the growth of the material well-being be a key purpose of the modern society? Should not unlimited consumption and satisfaction of needs make people happy?

The present study seeks to reflect on these issues and involve colleagues into the discussion.

## 2. Problem Statement

According to an axiom of economics and sociology, the need for a good, which is a thing or a phenomenon providing maximum benefits to the owner, is an inherent human right and a social achievement. The need for possessing and using a good may be natural or imposed by the society. Let us cite a definition of the good suggested by Radaev (2005): “Consumption is utilization of useful properties of a good to satisfy personal needs and disposal of this good. Consumption is a sum of economic relations between people and objects, and between people themselves”. Using the Marxian thesis “Utilizing is consuming”, Radaev (2005) reduces the complex process to the statement “utilization of useful properties of a good”. By eliminating desire, the process is studied from the midpoint. It is more reasonable to define consumption as a conscious practice, a discourse. A discourse is organization of social interactions. The consumption falls into this pattern. Informed consumption assumes that a good or service consumed is identified. A consumption discourse has verbal and behavioral forms. A verbal discourse is followed by purchases and consumption” (Ilyin, 2008). Despite the fact that Ilyin (2008) refers consumption to utilization of goods, he describes the process of desire formation: “Individual consumption is based on production and sales factors. Only purchased goods yield a profit. Therefore, businesses want us to eat much and tasty, buy obesity pills, training equipment for abs exercises, hair growth shampoos, etc. It is a marketing approach to consumption. Lacking or decreasing volumes of consumption mean sales volume reduction with all that it implies. Thus, “a human is a resource for achieving business and political purposes. According to the humanistic approach, consumption is reproduction of oneself and for oneself. It is individual consumption (Ilyin, 2008).

Using a well-known model of the state of needs developed by Murray who considers a need as a conscious desire resulted from relations between the external environment and an individual, one can develop the social logic of consumption: an unconscious desire for a good (unconscious motive), social pressure (instincts, socialization, advertising, etc.), a target motive (developed conscious desire), a search

for a good, utilization of a good. The most important aspect of the model is the conscious desire (Nath, 2017). Marketing and advertising specialists, politicians fight for these desires.

Philosophers and economists argue that a man is constantly striving to satisfy unlimited wants. There are different economic laws which declare limitlessness and infinity of human wants (e.g., the Engel's law). These laws are the laws of progress, i.e. they improve human lives. Only deficient natural and other resources limit their effects. Baudrillard says that we live in the consumer era, in which consumption changes the environment of a human as far as it covers all areas of human lives. Consumerism is a social phenomenon which forms special perception of things, information and reality. Consumption is satisfaction of desires rather than vital needs of humans. Closer analysis shows that this consumer ideology is timeless and trivial. Under the influence of living conditions, the ideology of consumption dominates and masters the reality. A special type of overconsumption develops. It is derived from market interests rather than human needs.

However, there are those who disagree that unlimited global consumption and progress are correlating phenomena. In the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there appeared well-known reports to the Club of Rome on the limits to growth which were developed into the theories of sustainable development. Improvement of living standards of the population is stated as a goal of humanity. The strategy of sustainable development involves identifying assumptions and conditions of long-term existence of humans. To this end, human needs have to be satisfied so that it will not lead to degradation of the biosphere and impairment of interest of future generations (Ursul, 1998). The sustainable society is able to exist during the lifetime of many generations. It is prudent, flexible and rational enough to protect its physical and social systems (Meadows, 1994). This society has information, social and institutional mechanisms which control the growth of population and economy, living standards and natural environment.

According to Mantatov and Mantatova (2008), "one of the causes of the impending catastrophe is a dominant value paradigm directing the society to limitless consumption of natural resources. If the cause of the ecological crisis is irrational stimulation of consumer instincts, the natural environment can be protected only through moral self-limitation and development of moral needs".

Thus, one can conclude that there are two stable opposite approaches to consumption issues. The economic approach assumes that limitless consumption is a necessity which is based on the human nature and limited only by deficient natural resources. The sociological approach assumes that consumption is a social rather than a natural phenomenon. It depends on the ability of a society to form desires which are a basis for needs. "The emergence of a consumer society leads to the fact that the whole life of modern societies is organized around and through consumption. Things become not so much a means of meeting the needs as symbols, markers of social identity and belonging".

### **3. Research Questions**

Due to the decreasing amount of natural resources and ecological loading, the main enemy of humanity is humans themselves: "The greatest enemy of mankind is a man himself, his activities. Our lives aiming to destroy are full of conflicts. The nations have rich knowledge but lack wisdom. We are fumbling keys of survival and stability" (King, 1992). The "green" economy was declared one of the solutions. It involves production and consumption of environmentally friendly products and responsibility of consumers

to put pressure on manufacturers to move towards sustainable production (Autio, Heiskanen, & Heinonen, 2014). However, there are still no indicatives of consumption of “green” products. To assess living standards, the old indices suggested by the UN have been used: literacy rate, number of citizens graduated from higher educational institutions, GDP per capita, etc. In annual UN reports on human development, living standards in different countries are assessed using these indices. The analysis shows that they are quantity parameters of the levels of consumption of different goods and services, including food, transport, education and health services, household goods, etc. Thus, living standards are an integral concept reflecting the level of consumption and stimulating further development of consumer societies. A utopia is a part and parcel of the theory of sustainable development aimed to create consumer societies on a global scale. At current and predicted levels of technological development, only 15% of the population will live in countries which have high levels of consumption of material and spiritual wealth, i.e. in consumer societies. The goal to ensure continuous growth of consumption under the market economy aimed to produce high-margin goods and services can lead to the impending catastrophe.

Innovation of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is deep awareness of the responsibility for future due to long-term predictions and a large number of changes. The Stockholm Memorandum became a top of the awareness. It concludes that the planet has entered a new geological age, the Anthropocene. Humans are now the most significant driver of global change, and our collective actions could have abrupt and irreversible consequences for human communities and ecological systems (The Stockholm Memorandum, 2011). The Nobel Laureates referred to this provision as a Great Transformation which requires changes in human thinking.

Awareness of the limits brings the issue of responsibility into the foreground (Jonas, 2004). However, S. Bauman says that the ethics of responsibility is unable to solve the problems caused by irrational human activities. The global world is a world of uncontrollable market forces which are extraterritorial and irresponsible (Bauman, 2002). According to Hart-Landsberg (2015), even a “robust” capitalism is now an obstacle to human progress because of the rise of speculative bubbles. Those bubbles finally burst and the economy is now mired in stagnation with no end in sight (Hart-Landsberg, 2015).

Current consumption is a response to “the shock of future” which is experienced by a human and society as a whole. “The modern society is different from all previous forms of human existence” (Bauman, 2005). It is not able to adapt its members to changing conditions. As a result, humans are disoriented and helpless in the social space. They do not feel like creators of their existence conditions” (Bauman, 2005). One of the solutions is to purchase objects, symbols, etc., which give them pleasure and help accept uncertainty of future. Thus, consumption is a social adaptation mechanism. It makes people more adaptive to a changing social system. “Adaptive improvement is a process due to which a wide range of resources becomes available to social units. As a result, they can become released from restrictions” (Parsons, 1966). The relative balance between the internal world of a human and the external environment occurs. If consumption is associated with the need for self-development, positive adaptation or “fruitful orientation” can be observed (Fromm, 2006). It unveils human abilities, involves self-fulfillment.

There are, however, negative forms of social adaptation – overconsumption and underconsumption (inability to attain an established level of consumption). “The culture of consumption turns a human into an egoist. If traditional cultures united people, the ideology of consumption assumes satisfaction of

individual needs which destroys the unity at different levels – from family to confessions, from small groups to large ones. Such mottos as “Consume much, produce little” generate laziness and extra-high demands. Hedonism is destructive for nations due to their passivity” (Ilyin, 2013).

Negative adaptation in the form of utilization of someone else’s resources is destructive for and individual and society as a whole (Sovetova, 2004). Sovetova (2004) distinguishes between two types of negative adaptation of working-age individuals: social and economic dependence and social parasitism. Strategies of self-restriction, passive adaptation and expectation are typical of social and economic dependence. Social and economic dependence and social parasitism are ritualistic and innovation types of social adaptation. Ritualistic adaptation involves passive economic behavior (hope of public paternalism) and leads to losses of social status and economic poverty. Innovation adaptation means social parasitism.

Thus, one can conclude that the modern society is not socially responsible. It is facing a dilemma: responsible behavior vs. irresponsible behavior.

This duality reflects in consumption: on the one hand, unlimited needs are infinite; on the other hand, the environment imposes limitations on their satisfaction. Limitations can be eliminated. Inability to get a good forces humans to search for it in virtual spaces and social networks which have a positive impact on the provision of social goods” as distinct from limitations.

A limit is a high degree of a good. According to the ancient Greek philosophers, “the supreme good” involves certain desirability, an idea of self-sufficiency, perfection. A Latin equivalent *finis* meaning “boundary”, “limit”, “finiteness” did not imply this sense. Therefore, no wonder that Cicero wanted to build a hierarchy of goods establishing which good is ultimate. Cicero suggested the concept of *extremum* which means “border”, “limit” - differentiation, destruction of the integral world. At the same time, units which can be a basis for a new entity are identified by means of disintegration.

#### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The article aims to analyze the dichotomy: unlimited consumption vs. limited consumption.

#### **5. Research Methods**

The research is based on dialectical, system-based structural approaches as well comparative analysis. The dialectical approach identifies general regularities of the dichotomy: unlimited consumption vs. limited consumption, its contradictory nature manifesting itself in the unity and struggle of unlimited and limited as opposing trends determining the dynamics of consumption. The conflict of these modes can be eliminated if the issue is analyzed based on the dialectical complementarity principle which helps present the phenomenon of consumption as a dichotomy creating a stress field for opposites. The system-based structural approach is used to identify the integral nature of the research object, analyze a diversity of relations of a complex object and integrate them in one theory. The comparative approach helps identify similarities and differences of economic and social theories, their potential for the present research.

The article also uses general scientific methods (rising from the abstract to the concrete, systematization, hypothesis, deduction, analogy, generalization, formalization, extrapolation, comparison, and description).

## 6. Findings

Global social changes which occurred in the new millennium force people to comprehend the fact that basic trends of the stable, predicted world (inexhaustibility of natural resources, eternity of life, self-regulation of ecosystems, social progress, etc.) can fundamentally change. “Consumers also want to better understand what is happening in order to choose, with greater awareness, products that are healthier and more respectful of the environment and the principles of social justice” (Corvo, 2016). The limits of the possible rather than the rationale for the possible are important. When something is limited, it changes. In the limited space, thinking is paradoxical rather than conceptual. “It is difficult to build clarity of thought. There is no truth, there is no lie here” (Girenok, 2008). To conclude, it is necessary to remember that consumption involves full satisfaction (overconsumption) or absolute disregard of human needs (underconsumption). A search for the golden mean should take into account the social role of consumption as an adaptation mechanism and the role of the society in formation of human desires. It is important to remember that the level of technical progress can lead to the quickest possible satisfaction of most human desires, i.e. to unlimited consumption.

## 7. Conclusion

Today consumption is a basis for economic development of countries. Therefore, the constant stimulation of demand is an inevitable and necessary phenomenon for the maintenance of the current social order. Human needs go beyond physiological requirements, the needs of a social and spiritual level are endless. That is why, in this context, it is fair to speak of an endless process of consumption. The 2008-2012 economic crisis called into question the sustainability of the individualistic consumer society. The critiques on the mass consumer society entered the mainstream as gloomy predictions on the economy became real. However, for better or for worse, this long-term crisis represents an opportunity for the creation of a new model of growth to reform modern society, structurally as well as culturally. Taking into account that attempts to limit consumption by means of social segregation (the excessive level of consumption by the rich is compensated for the low level of consumption by the poor) or religious restrictions were unsuccessful, it is necessary to develop a consumption model based on human desires. The model will be based on desires for self-development rather than for material possession.

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