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THE CLASS QUESTION AT THE CHECKOUT COUNTER

CONSUMPTION, CLASS, CRITIQUE

In view of the overexploitation of natural resources, the immense generation of waste, and the ongoing destruction of the planet's ecological foundations the critique of consumerism is in vogue. On all sides there is criticism of the madness of the growth society and mass consumerism. The dominant critique has come from the social conservative and green bourgeois camps. The economist Meinhard Miegel and the social psychologist Harald Welzer, respectively, can be taken as examples. Both capture the contemporary mood. In their arguments we find the elements – cultural-pessimist, neoliberal, and critical of capitalism – that name the problems, address the distress, and capture people's desires. But they offer a limited understanding of consumption and the satisfaction of needs, because they do not consider class relations and often argue moralistically instead of politically. Consumption, however, is a class issue.¹

For Meinhard Miegel the secret of a fulfilled life today lies in renunciation, moderation, and leisure, rather than consumption. In the face of the boundless 'squandering' of all areas of life, it involves the lost capacity to again enjoy the simple pleasures of daily life. Instead of seeking personal happiness in possession, we need, according to him, to establish a new definition of prosperity – prosperity on a non-material, a de-materialised, basis: 'Actual prosperity specific to human beings – this means living consciously, using one's senses, having time for oneself and for others, for children, family members, friends [...], it means taking pleasure in nature, art, beauty, learning.'² Behind his romantic plea lies the deeply anti-social conviction that the personal responsibility of individuals must increasingly replace public social services, these no longer being affordable: 'The big drinking spree is over, the bar has closed down.'³ This situation indeed requires creative restriction.

Harald Welzer, too, asks for a downsized lifestyle and praises virtues such as personal responsibility and frugality. But unlike Miegel he wants to lead his readers towards active resistance – against the boundlessness of the growth society and 'hyper-consumerism'. His individualistic plea for people 'to think for themselves' instead of uncritically joining in the 'culture of everything all the time', is connected to a rejection of the organisations of the subalterns (trade unions, left parties) and evidences an elitist view of social transformation, which involves the economic and consumption behaviour of a model avant-garde, which has understood that contemporary ecological problems are, according to Welzer, not

solvable through technology and social planning but only through a fundamental rejection of the growth drive, debt spirals, and profit-orientation. Out of the manifold niches of alternative (middle-class specific) modes of life the Other is supposed to emerge. However, for many an economy without growth is completely inconceivable, since it would amount to personal stagnation and stagnation in the growth of prosperity. Here Welzer is emphatic: '[But] this is growth – it is something that paradoxically becomes the more important the further material satiety proceeds and the better vital needs are covered.'⁴ What, and especially whose, needs are being concretely met, is not addressed.

There is also some left criticism of consumption that censures the 'consumption lust' of many people in the affluent society. It urges limiting the fulfilment of 'authentic' needs to sharing, do-it-yourself, or repair instead of running after every new hype. Less is more; anyway, we know that shopping doesn't make you happy. Using psychologising addiction metaphors, the post-growth economist Niko Paech, for example, deplors that 'We are dependent on consumption. We are junkies. And junkies do nothing against the dealer.'⁵ Left consumption criticism often points out miserable working conditions in especially exploitative companies, draws attention to the production of harmful goods (unhealthy food, poisonous toys) and calls for conscious consumption by responsible citizens or for the boycotting of specific brands. In so doing it invokes the power of individual consumption decisions. Critics of this position fault the gesture of the moral finger-pointing that pits 'true' needs

against 'false' ones, that reduces the structural parameters in capitalism to individual consumer choices, and that takes no account of the comprehensive integration of individuals via commodity consumption. But the critique of the criticism of consumption in turn tends to point to a universal context of delusion, in which all cats look grey at night and all modes of life are alienated. A way out? No chance.

The varieties of consumption criticism address urgent problems, indicate possible alternatives, and yet do not do justice to the problematic. This is because what gets short-changed in most interventions are the questions of what marks the class character of consumption and how a political practice – viable in everyday life – can move within the contradictions of the capitalist world of consumption.

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF CONSUMPTION

Consumption is not something individual; it is a 'socially determined activity'⁶ closely interwoven with the mode of production and life of a specific society. Ever since the super-session of subsistence production a large part of human needs must be met within commodity-producing societies, with their divisions of labour, through consumption mediated by money: We do not take what we need but shop for what we can afford. In capitalism the reproduction of labour power – that is, the daily expenditures of wage dependents on food, clothing, education, housing, child-rearing, leisure time, etc. – is at the same time a driving factor in the valorisation of capital. Commodity consumption and the circulation of capital form a structural context of production, circulation, and consumption. In the 'golden' decades of Fordism this context obviously was expressed in mass goods such as washing machines, televisions, and Volkswagens. They symbolised the triumphal march of the market economy via the satisfaction of all conceivable needs. As the neoliberal, information-technology mode of production took root the possibilities of putting the conditions of life of wage dependents at the service of capital accumulation were expanded further still: Alongside the inherited forms of exchange – commodity against money – diverse financial products became established, which increasingly turned employees into credit users. This was possible through the introduction and expansion of instalment payments, consumer credit, e-commerce, government-funded mortgage loans and building credits, the invention of credit cards, or the privatisation of pension funds. In this accelerated accumulation dynamic through private debt, capital opened up new profitable fields of investment. A reduction of this consumption on credit would contradict capital's interest in valorisation. Superfluity and waste are a 'business necessity to the "unfortunate" capitalist' – as Marx already knew.⁷ And, in the end, the biggest, the 'absolute consumer'⁸ is capital itself – of labour power, land and the means of production. And, incidentally, capital is also the greatest squanderer through its over-production and discarding of commodities and natural resources. It generates a throwaway society, with the planned obsolescence of its products.

Needs too are neither individual nor timeless. Consequently, they are neither right nor wrong in themselves but are historically conditioned, socially constructed, and normatively shaped. Thus, for example, in the German 'economic miracle' under Ludwig Erhard people were encouraged to consume; saving was out. In the permanent revolutionising of capitalist production new needs are constantly being created, new standards set, and new property

norms imposed. Still, not all inclinations, wishes, and desires are equally satisfied; it is mainly the profitable ones that are. Consumption is therefore not an activity of individuals or of a specific breed of people; rather it is a generalised conduct of life, a mode of consumption. Nevertheless, not everyone has access to the same opportunities to meet their needs in the prevailing manner, especially since consumer behaviour significantly differs according to pocketbook, socialisation, and status. Although in the figure of the consumer all distinction of class, race, and gender is obliterated, advertisement, for example, pursues sales strategies aimed at specific milieus or genders, targeting various groups of clients. Consumer behaviour is shaped according to class: Luxury consumption exists alongside food assistance centres, shopping in organic supermarkets alongside shopping at Aldi and Lidl. This has consequences for the critique of consumption.

'BUY YOURSELF HAPPY'⁹ –

THE CLASS CHARACTER OF CONSUMPTION

How do the poor, the rich, and the middle class consume? Class-specific consumption patterns operate in numerous areas: People with extra cash, and who at times turn up their noses at the consumption habits of broad sectors of the population, gain distinction through price, quality, and exclusivity. The well-to-do and members of the upper middle class generally live in bigger apartments or houses with more energy and water needs, own a second or third home, have hobbies (like golf, horseback riding, tennis, and sailing) which take up a lot of space, and take more frequent and longer trips, often long-distance trips in airplanes, and so do their children. They drive more luxurious cars, or several of them, go to restaurants with special-quality menus and acquire more exotic products from premium, rare material – with or without quality seals for sustainability. Even when they shop at regional markets and give up air-freighted pineapples, their ecological footprint is on average bigger, their consumption of resources greater, than the incriminated masses.¹⁰ Not only does their consumer behaviour pose the ecological question in a different way; most importantly it manifests relations of social inequality. For Germany the more or less peaceful coexistence of 'hyper-consumerism and death by famine'¹¹ in the world means soup kitchens, rationed shopping vouchers, malnutrition, and susceptibility to disease alongside growing wealth, rising energy consumption, and sophisticated luxury.

But what about the middle and lower-middle income groups whose consumption accounts for the mass of goods bought? Every year they acquire a new cell phone, buy the latest brand clothing, set up a giant flat-screen monitor in their small rooms, and dash off with EasyJet to another city for a long weekend. This is true in many cases, and the consequences of this consumer behaviour are problematic, for common sense says that it is not ecologically sustainable. Yet in society dominated by commodity production consumption, alongside the satisfaction of needs, is a path to social participation and mobility. Thus laptops and smartphones, for example, in no way serve only as the technical gear of the 'information society' but are admission tickets to social networks, that is, the spaces where contacts are made and cultivated, news exchanged, and where hierarchies and competition rule – in short, where society takes place. Participation in this society is especially important for those who do not have access to other means of power and influence – a class question.

Under alienated conditions consumption is also compensation. It lends short-lived meaning and makes it possible to take part in society's promises of happiness. Erich Fromm put the identity-creating effect of possession for one's sense of self-worth in a nutshell: 'I am what I have.' Alongside the daily enticement to consume – precipitated by aggressive advertising, especially on the internet – the capacity to consume can become the criterion for inclusion and exclusion in terms of social esteem, status, culture, prestige, and taste. We can ask with Pierre Bourdieu: Who is especially dependent on these forms of recognition, and who distinguishes themselves and in what way? – a class question.

In view of the lack of opportunities for many dependently employed people to shape their work in a meaningful and self-determined way, consumption offers a temporary escape from heteronomy – as an escape valve in the face of the pressure, frustration, or exhaustion of wage labour, as a distraction from unemployment without prospects, as a short-term retreat from the boredom, isolation, or stress of domestic reproductive work. Consumption permits the 'most effective respite from physical and nervous strain' in the shortest possible time – through the act of purchase.¹² Many know the feeling of stress reduction through shopping although everyone knows that we cannot buy ourselves happiness; since shopping does not produce meaning a hollow feeling often remains. However, not all work in capitalism is badly paid, deadly boring, or poorly recognised. A fulfilling and self-determined life needs less fulfilment mediated through consumer goods and less recognition mediated through status symbols. Compensatory consumption is – a class question.

Consumption also has an integrative-disciplining effect. The person who needs a bank credit has to successfully master the mode of life associated with getting it – a regular income via gainful employment, docile behaviour if there is a danger of losing one's job, no long illnesses, reliable self-management (for example, no negative credit reports, prompt rent payments). When there is no authentic political participation in the shaping of economy and society private consumption restores some control over personal decisions and preferences. The promise of freedom this gives offers temporary self-determination at the price of lasting, still severer subjection to debt service and the need to earn. The only ones who can escape this logic are those who are not dependent on income from the sale of their labour power but can have others work for them – self-evidently a class question.

And what happens to those who are unable to consume? Commodity producing society offers them no alternative to money-mediated consumption for satisfying their needs. Apart from retreat into their garden plots, the solidary protective nets of their immediate environment (if there are any), or financial dependency on their married partner they have no exit option. Here the loss of creditworthiness 'becomes the maximum credible accident'.¹³ Those who lose their creditworthiness, and therefore capacity to consume, are excluded from the established forms of sociality and from the bulk of possible social contacts.

AND NOW? CONSUMPTION IN 'INFRASTRUCTURE-SOCIALISM'

The generic demand to 'grow less, consume less' is class-blind. Any answer to the question of how to tackle problems bound up with consumption, growth, and waste has to make

more distinctions. This, for example, means at first calling – as absurd as it may seem – for more consumption possibilities for the lower classes. The political-societal (not moral-individual) question here is: What kind of consumption?

A perspective of socio-ecological transformation must grapple with the dilemma that the radical reduction of resource consumption and harmful emissions implies either significant price increases resulting from consistent eco-taxes or the legally restricted use of specific goods. The first variant leads to a disproportionate burdening of poor households, the second to a restriction of individual freedom. This dilemma makes clear the contradictions within which the paths to a socially just and ecological mode of consumption must be discovered.

Ulrich Schachtschneider asks 'From what point of view can one forbid or allow a particular life style? In what kind of halfway democratic procedure could this take place? [...] If we cannot and do not want to regulate everything in detail, the price of natural resource use can set a limit on an individual's total natural resource use, but one which at the same time makes possible the freedom of his or her own life project in a way appropriate to modernity.'¹⁴ But why should the path only consist of price? Schachtschneider points to the 'inadequacy of state regulatory initiatives in environmental policy'. Yet it is precisely these state requirements and prohibitions that have often brought the most effective ecological benefits – for example, the prohibition on HCFCs, limit values for pollutants, or the legal restrictions on sugar in chocolate bars – or the Japanese principle of using whatever is the most energy-efficient variant of a product as the standard. Why should we not try to enforce socio-ecological minimal standards in production, whether in textile factories in Bangladesh or chicken farms in Germany? Or a prohibition on super lorries and SUVs, or on genetically modified food products for people and animals? These in no way restrict individual freedom of choice and are democratic in that they affect everyone, not just those who cannot (or who can no longer) afford certain things. Numerous social discourses and movements are pushing in the direction of responsible modes of production and consumption. With these requirements and prohibitions there could also be further control mechanisms, such as quantitative limits and the setting of quotas, incentives via pricing, and state sponsorship of alternative products and forms of production, such as cooperatives or non-commercial suppliers.

The demand for more consumption may seem strange. However, in many spheres decades of neoliberal policy have thinned out the social infrastructures and services that covered basic needs. In many cases these needs are now not met, which leads to overload, stress, illness, and poverty. Consequently, struggles over reproduction and the modes of life have again come to the fore. It is possible to connect to these – the struggles for better childcare and schools, for mobility, education, and healthcare for all, for affordable housing, or struggles over time. They all revolve around modern basic human needs, which cannot always be regulated via price. They should be available to each individual, regardless of other consumption decisions, free of charge or at very low cost.

A unifying perspective for these struggles would be the demand for a free public infrastructure. This comprises an unconditional socio-ecological provision of basic services, for example in the spheres of energy, drinking water, mobil-

ity, internet, etc., as well as free healthcare, education, and continuing education, and the right to affordable housing. The party DIE LINKE proposed basic energy provision free of charge, but with steeply increasing tariffs for people who consume a lot more. This principle could be applied beyond the case of energy. It would mean per capita quotas for free drinking water but an increase in the cost of maintaining a private swimming pool, free municipal public transport but surcharges for frequent air travel, free access to the internet and to digital goods but price increases for huge data transfers, etc. The provision of necessary healthcare, initial training, and certain time periods for continuing education should be possible for all and be free of charge. Affordable housing space (including in city centres) can be achieved through a mix of rent regulation, social housing, the promotion of non-profit-oriented collective property, and an appropriate land property policy.¹⁵

Such an orientation to the collective consumption of modern subsistence goods in the sense of a (municipal) 'infrastructure-socialism' would be the basis of individual freedom beyond fear for one's existence – and would thus support a socio-ecological mode of life. Radically expanding free, public, and collective forms of consumption would also mean making money, as the 'procurer between one's need and the object',¹⁶ and thus individual wallets, less relevant, pushing back the culture of the market, and prioritising the public and the common. Individual consumer decisions that go beyond the meeting of basic needs would thus be embedded in an anxiety-free way of life with less (consumption) pressure.

The precondition for this substantial expansion of social infrastructure and a corresponding equipping of the public sphere would be a policy of radical redistribution from top to bottom – a necessary though insufficient precondition of all left policies. Expanding the financial room for manoeuvre is indispensable in the struggle for the unconditional provision of basic social services, as a mode of collective consumption that would be taken for granted.

Alongside the establishment of the public sector as its own economy, 'infrastructure-socialism' also makes a thorough socio-ecological transformation of production necessary, just as it does a fundamental restructuring of the world of work. An initiative for the humanisation of work in the sense of relations of labour beyond precarity would, for example, mean fighting for a greater financial as well as social valuation of poorly paid, invisible, typically feminine professions (for example, care-work, child-rearing, wellness, cleaning), for a minimum wage that would not be cosmetic but would secure people's existence, for comprehensive health protection (for example, stress prevention) at the workplace, and for a general reduction in working hours. At the same time the reproductive work performed in households – both the unpaid and the paid labour frequently performed by (illegalised) immigrants – needs to be made visible and recognised as socially necessary. A socialist project puts the reproductive sphere at the centre of social transformation. This applies both to the performed activities in the public sector and to free, non-profit-oriented entities, and for the unpaid work done by all at home, which requires appropriate time resources. The care of the elderly and sick, child-caring, health, etc. would no longer be matters of individual purchasing power or personal time budgeting but would be non-commodified activities not mediated through money, for which there would be suitable infrastructure.

With the wealth gained in terms of time – in escaping from the hamster wheel – prospects open up, which make an abstention from consumption in other spheres attractive. A 'more enjoyable life style, an "elegance of simplicity"', can only develop on the basis of a free everyday life. [...] A massive turn to Less will only have a chance if it does not appear as a tedious though unavoidable change but becomes attractive as a liberation from restrictive, stressful, and socially isolating conditions.¹⁷ Instead of a blanket condemnation of consumption the needs of the subaltern groups and classes ought to be more exactly determined and taken seriously: What is missing, what is needed, desired? What is it that has expressed consumer behaviour up to now? What desires remain unfulfilled? How do we want to live? This is how we can establish the connection between the price/cost of consumer behaviour up to now – in the literal and figurative senses – and one's own needs. This connection could be nurtured in a different way within a needs-oriented reproduction economy, because 'only when social relations are so oriented that self-determined activity becomes the rule and "labour has become not only a means of life but life's prime want" (Marx)', 'will there be no more pathology of "compensatory consumption" (Haug)'.¹⁸ That is the point at which even a non-material, non-commodified prosperity will make sense for more people; that is when less will really be more.

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1 We would like to thank Claudia Bechstein for the helpful advice and information she provided. **2** Meinhard Miegel: *Exit. Wohlstand ohne Wachstum*, Berlin 2010, p. 247. **3** *Ibid.*, p. 165. **4** Harald Welzer: 'Ohne jede Bodenhaftung', in: *SZ-Magazin* 50/2011. **5** www.dw.de/wir-haben-genug-jungekonsumkritik/a-17221414. **6** Michel Aglietta, as quoted in: Thomas Sablowski: Article 'Konsumnorm/Konsumweise', in: *Historisch-Kritisches Wörterbuch des Marxismus* [Historical-Critical Dictionary of Marxism – HKWM], edited by Wolfgang Fritz Haug, vol. 7/II, Hamburg 2010, col. 1646. **7** Karl Marx: *Das Kapital*. Erster Band, MEW 23, p. 620. *Capital*, Vol. I, Chapter 24, Section 3 **8** Wolfgang Fritz Haug: article 'Konsument', in: *HKWM*, vol. 7/II, col. 1621. **9** The advertising slogan of a German department-store chain. **10** For empirical evidence see Ulrich Schachtschneider: 'Nachhaltig-emanzipatorisch Umverteilen' [Sustainable and Emancipatory Redistribution], in: *LuXemburg* 2/2013, p. 61. **11** Franz Hochstrasser/Peter Jehle: article 'Konsumismus', in: *HKWM*, vol. 7/II, col. 1639. **12** Michel Aglietta, as quoted in: Sablowski: 'Konsumnorm/Konsumweise', *Op. cit.*, col. 1648. **13** Hochstrasser/Jehle: 'Konsumismus', *Op. cit.*, col. 1634. **14** Schachtschneider: *Op. cit.*, p. 62. **15** To the extent that it is possible to contemplate state policies not divorced from capitalist domination, it is not a question of just any given, democratic commonweal. Rather, what is at stake is a left 'state project', which ensures conditions for the generalisation of a socio-ecological mode of life, starting from civil-society (class) confrontations. At the same time this means democratising the state itself through the construction in particular of municipal public infrastructure. **16** Karl Marx: *Ökonomisch-philosophische Manuskripte*, MEW 40, p. 563; *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (Third Manuscript: *The Power of Money*). **17** Schachtschneider: *Op. cit.*, pp. 63 f. **18** Hochstrasser/Jehle: *Op. cit.*, col. 1642.

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