

**THE BUCHAREST UNIVERSITY OF ECONOMIC STUDIES**  
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**Confrontation of ideas regarding the consumer model.**  
**Alternatives for the future**

**- Summary -**

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**Key words:** consumption, wants, consumer culture, propensity to consume, saving, value, valuation errors, referential, addictions, neuroscience, behavioral economics, reflection.

### **Summary**

The subject of this thesis revolves around the matter of “consumer society”, as it has become accustomed to designate, in certain contexts, the society that we live in; if something that we bought recently gets broken, we say that we live in a consumer society and things are no longer made to endure as in “former times”; maybe we say the same when we see on tv various exhibits of material opulence. While it is true that the subject of this thesis is represented by the

consumer society or culture, the paper does not intend being a pleading against something, for the case being, against the consumption model of the societies and cultures that could be tagged as “consumer”. This mention is made as the approach that criticizes overconsumption or symbolical consumption has become somehow customarily. The author takes consumption for what it is – a sum of means that satisfy needs, bring joy, and in the end define and fulfill, among other factors, the humanity of man. Truly, as we can observe numerous situations of superfluous consumption, a great part of mankind still suffers a lot because of lacks in consumption. In this context, it becomes clear that humanity finds itself on a positive path when it is able to produce goods and provide services which, adequately distributed, will satisfy, cast away suffering, and bring fulfilment.

In this context, the thesis consists in a pleading for reflection. Sociologist Ernest Bernea (1905 – 1990), a scholar of great prestige of the interwar period, afterwards a victim of the communist regime repression, wrote the essay “Inteligența ordonatoare”<sup>1</sup> in 1941. There, he expresses a standing according to which “a real abyss was set between the old world and the new world”, in the context in which “new conceptions, inventions, products of all kinds have radically and unexpectedly changed the entire objective and subjective state of man” (op.cit., ed. 2011, p. 115). Bernea considers that “human activity produced a lot in material sense, but has also created a condition against human nature and its own destiny”, as “the external continuous strain does not leave the necessary respite, neither the possibility of ordering the affective life” (p. 116). To Ernest Bernea, the coordinates of human existence in the new cultural context are improper:

“Everything happens from outside, at the confines, for immediate, practical and material success” (p. 116).

In brief, it might be said that the current thesis consists of an illustration of the standing expressed by Ernest Bernea, standing that we take as an assumption, and which, if proven true, would show the need for reflection regarding the way that we understand to approach the relation between spirit and matter within human existence. In fact, we appreciate that one of the areas where the arguments of Bernea apply in a practical and punctual way is consumption. In this context, we examine the valences of consumption and we pose questions regarding its actual adequacy in relation to human and natural laws. To this scope, our proposition for reflection

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<sup>1</sup> „The ordering intelligence”, t.a..

turns rather into a challenge addressed with the purpose of producing interrogations related to our own consumption behavior and its returns, from an individual, community and social standpoint.

At the beginning, we find ourselves in a position of observing the negative effects that an improper approach of consumption may have upon the person, community and, in a wider scope, at a social and economic level. Otherwise, a ph.d. thesis is supposed being designed to build an alternative to a matter that might be considered troublesome, or at least propose improvements of certain processes. Therefore, a natural starting point could be highlighting the inadequacy existing within consumption.

From such a standing, the thesis commences by indicating a couple of motivations that determined the submittal to the theme of consumption, this “total social phenomenon” (McCracken, 1987, p. 143). At first glance, we notice the fact that numerous moments of our daily existence are accompanied by messages of commercial nature; this situation is synthesized by professor Adrian Sorin Mihalache as follows:

“Especially in the big cities, street panels or vast surfaces of the buildings facades are covered, almost invariably, with commercials. Packed with colored images and persuasive messages, commercials plead commendably for products and services, inviting us, without delay, to urgently draw up a contract, make an acquisition, consume, to urgently experience something new. (...) Advertising can now be done at home, directly in the intimacy of private life, being able to pervade my thoughts and emotions at any hour, from morning until late at night, through advertising spots, through printings” (Mihalache, 2017, pp. 27-28).

From the description of professor Mihalache we understand that such promoting activities are backed by consistent efforts, be it evaluated in working time or money. Supposedly, these efforts are not made aimlessly, but would be determined by precise purposes. As it is obvious that the purpose of the commercial message resides in influencing people’s orientation with regard to certain products, services or brands that the respective message represents, a marketing consultant observed already since 1955 that the implications of promoting a certain article are greater than it can be perceived at first glance:

“A specific advertising and promotional campaign, for a particular product at a particular time, has no automatic guarantee of success, yet it may contribute to

the general pressure by which wants are stimulated and maintained. Thus its very failure may serve to fertilize this soil, as does so much else that seems to go down the drain” (Lebow, 1955, p. 8).

In the socio-cultural context indicated until now, a couple of questions arise:

1. What, and how much of what we consume is an image of certain means that are useful for satisfying the needs and meeting the wants that we became aware of and upon which we have reflected?
2. To what extent our consumption is a putting into practice of a program that is set from outside of our being, by merchandisers and other influencers, in the context of certain objectives that they have set to themselves and in which the consumption of people is one of the variables determining their objectives?

In the context indicated in brief until now, certain concerns appear:

- Under the impulse of countless sources that tell us what “good life” means, individuals might switch between a path that leads them towards a fulfilled, and complex life and an existential route emptied of profound meanings, in the context of obstinately claiming the primacy of the material factor, to the marginalization of the spiritual coordinates of human existence. In such a case, individuals might experience the lack of satisfaction after consumption, generated by accessing an excessive and inadequate consumption.
- At community level, the social thread bears the signs of damage caused by the application of certain criteria of market efficiency within human relations, fact that leaves lesser room for authentic collaboration and gratuitousness;
- The existence of certain reprobable commercial practices, in the context in which nowadays the techniques of persuading consumers make use of the medical knowledge with reference to the way in which brain conducts actions under the impulse of certain stimuli; here arise serious matters of business ethics, and, in general, with regard to the morality that exists in society;
- In another plan, it is distinguished the discussion related to nature. This is sometimes perceived as a prey and not as a common house of mankind, a tie between past generations, the present ones and those to come. To this end, we, the ones of today, are somehow the safeguards of the well-being of the ones who will succeed us.

- The decline of saving rates and the unsustainable growth of the degrees of indebtedness (at individual and social level) generates burdening conditions for individuals and limits the capacity of maintaining and growth of the economic status – a sign that the way consumption is financed is to a good extent improper.

Starting from these observations, it might be said that “something” is not right with regard to the way that consumption is perceived and accomplished. In this respect, the thesis formed around its main objective, of becoming an implement that will generate people’s reflection with regard to the way they choose to consume. The thesis addresses, virtually, to everybody, in the context in which each of us has its own states of consumer. The proposal mentioned previously is, therefore, one towards reflections, valuation, with the purpose of offering those who are interested some landmarks for taking decisions of consumption that will help them live a more fulfilled life, with more satisfactions. We believe that such an objective is the more relevant today as people are more and more engaged in changes intermediated by the market in order to obtain the things needed for subsistence and for the fulfillment of their desires. Otherwise, also the number of products that people use throughout life was almost always to be found on an ascending trend.

In the context described above, an approach in three plans was designed, to each of them corresponding one of the three main chapters of the thesis, from which derives a series of secondary objective. The first plan refers to the conceptual, historical, and terminological frameworks of the theme of consumption, in general, and in particular, with regard to what we shall see that has been outlined under the name of *consumer culture*. Practically, we tried to offer an understanding of the valences that consumption has and its role in the dynamics of elements from which derives the status and growth of the economy. To this end, we resorted to arguments developed by consecrated economists, such as Alfred Marshall, Carl Menger, John Maynard Keynes, of an economist trending at the moment – the Czech Tomas Sedlacek, as well as those of other economists less known but which have expressed valuable ideas. We wanted to present consumption as a total social phenomenon and in this respect the first plan comprises numerous standpoints that anthropologists, sociologists, theologians, historians etc. expressed in relation to consumption and its implications in the plans of existence. Probably one of the most valuable perspectives that we succeeded in handling within the first plan is the historical one, laying down an account of certain moments that in time made the tag “consumer” come to

existence, in relation to some societies or cultures. Other important aspects taken into consideration in this plan are the linguistic ones. We tried to understand the lineage of some terms used in relation to consumer society and what would be the proper expression of them in Romanian, in agreement with the standings of experts. Some aspects that refer to frameworks and other approaches of consumption are also present in the following chapter.

The second plan considers the approach of consumption within behavioral economics. We believe that this approach is very useful, in the context in which advances in psychology and neuroscience allowed for the understanding of more and more aspects with reference to the thinking, attitudes and behaviors that we appropriate. In a special way, this chapter is dedicated to the original contribution brought by this thesis, presenting a model that we developed and which is meant for understanding the consumption patterns that persons adopt. The tool is called the *Lifestyle function with reference to consumption* and it adds to the behavioral approach within economics. The function proposes explanations related to the factors that shape individual consumption decisions, being formed around the dynamics of referential – attitudes – behavior in order to generate a lifestyle with reference to consumption. Also, the model indicates the effects of the adopted consumption, referring on the one side to the subjective well-being that an individual expects obtaining following consumption, and on the other side to the sustainability of the economy and of the natural environment - under the influences of the choices we make when satisfying our wants. Beyond psychological and neuroscience aspects, the approach is completed with elements of the theory of subjective value, from the standpoints of the Scholastics and of Carl Menger, in order to better understand the valuations that individuals make when choosing, and the errors to which their judgments of value might be subjected.

The last plan constitutes an empirical inquiry of the concepts, assumptions and objectives that have been enounced in the thesis. The inquiry pursued the attainment of a better understanding related to the function of lifestyle with reference to consumption, as well as to consumption in general, according to the themes that were highlighted within the thesis. With regard to the methodological framework, we used a questionnaire in order to obtain data referring to the perceptions and customs of people in relation to consumption. The questionnaire was filled in by 140 respondents, the results offering a complex perspective on consumption, as data related to numerous aspects has been collected, among which there is to be found:

- The interest for the impact of own consumption;
  - The influences felt when making decisions of consumption;
  - Food waste;
  - Waste management;
  - Saving, marginal propensity to consume;
- etc.

The hypotheses formulated within the research have been tested either through the responses offered by respondents, either through the Pearson correlation coefficient, where they referred to recognizing a functional relation between two sets of data.

The inquiry adds to the original contribution brought by this thesis.

By developing the three plans, we hope that we succeeded in building a solid pleading, according to the elements of context that were briefly presented in the beginning of the summary, and in compliance with the main objective that was established. According to the program established from the very beginning, throughout the thesis we did not indicated desirable conducts related to consumption, but we rather tried to build a thinking framework by means of which people may build a model of consumption that will bring them more satisfactions and will generate better results for the social texture and for the natural environment's sustainability. In this respect, our conclusions direct towards the idea of human ecology, in which reflection should occupy a greater space within our daily activities. Such an opinion contradicts the omnipresence of the retailers requests that urge us to act "now!" regarding our decisions of acquisition, respectively of consumption. The author expresses the hope that the arguments developed in the thesis will convince, contributing to the increase of the propensity to reflect, both within consumption, and within other aspects of our existence.

The difficulty of writing the thesis resided in acquiring a comprehensive perspective on consumption – given the scope of the subject – and drawing a relevant synthesis which would reflect the truth as better as possible. Not a few were the moments that requested more reflection, reassessments, and additional readings. Therefore, aware of my own limits, where appropriate, I tried to set the case in a way that leaves the reader understand my own doubts, inherent to human knowledge.