

# The Ideology of Consumption: The Challenges Facing a Consumerist Society

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## Abstract

With the advancements in modern capitalism, significant changes have been made in its goals and instruments. Past crises and the experiences acquired by economic institutions gave rise to the development of a special pattern of consumption rooted in the industrial revolution. In the post-modern period, we can observe the rise of a new ideology which is going through its completing process very quickly and a large mass is gaining a new perspective and prestige in consumerist societies. Understanding a consumerist society helps us to find out what instruments and fighting strategies the ideology of consumption uses and to what it causes damage. The role of the media is very important in this regard because they help to create false needs using virtual methods. On the other hand, due to the close relationship between ideology and politics, the consumerism crisis in society can be politically managed with success. In this regard, it is necessary for the political managers to understand different dimensions of the existing crisis and the challenges of the consumerist society and to find appropriate scientific and practical solutions to the problem. The main purpose of the present study is to shed some light on the challenges of a consumerist society by analyzing the features of the ideology of consumption and to focus on the influential role modern human beings play in this society as consumers and to evaluate the political dimensions of management of consumption pattern.

**Keywords:** ideology, politics, society, citizen, identity, consumption, consumerism

## 1. Introduction

The accumulation of capital in capitalist countries, the political and strategic goals of these countries, the problems of economic systems in the West, and also their need for new resources have been the motives for directing the capitalist towards classic colonization. Along with the completion of capitalism in America and Europe, colonization took different approaches in different lands and after awakening of the nations, the strategies and approaches of colonization also changed. In the next stage, known as the neo-colonization, direct colonization gives way to a more complicated system politically and economically. Political leaders and economic elite who were dependent on the pivotal countries yielded up the resources of the peripheral countries to the colonizing countries. At this stage, human beings witnessed some changes in consumption which led to the appearance and development of consumerism. Currently, considering the fact that individuals' communication with each other has been facilitated by the information technology, technology, and the closer relationships among the nations, the signs of consumerism can be seen in different societies and is not specific to a specific society.

Today with the greed for more consumption, fights, conflicts, and wars have increased over getting a larger share of the available resources worldwide. In addition, the modern human being has been constrained by the barriers of the ideology of consumption and created artificial identities and new temples called shopping centers.

Ideology is a kind of self-awakening. It is a system of clear, explicit and generally organized ideas and judgments that justify, interpret, and explain the position of a group or society. However, the consciousness and ideas of a consumerist society drift around in a virtual world and the people of this society have false feelings of happiness and move towards absurdity. Consumerism is deeply rooted in history and an analysis of its roots can assist in better understanding of the challenges of a consumerist society and the consequences of consumption.

## 2. The Roots of Consumerism

Consumption refers to the possession of a product for the purpose of meeting certain needs. Variable and colorful needs of the new era have no stability. Consumption is a part of the social system which explains the motivation to work for possessing products with the purpose of building a relationship with other human beings (Douglas & Isherwood, 1999).

The contemporary human being evaluates individual success in society from a totally material perspective and in terms of the potential for consumption. If consumption is the criterion for a successful life, happiness and even politeness, the flaws of human wishes are updated. There is no standard for satisfying the needs. The finish line moves forward simultaneously with the movement of the runners. Goals are always a few steps ahead. We always witness breaking of the records, but human wishes have no limit (Bauman, 1999).

Dynamicity of the new human was weakened with the advancement of the ideology of consumption and the dominance of its symbols which instigated their mental activities into further consumerism. Modern consumerists are physically inactive but mentally very active. Therefore, alienation and being far from each other has entered into the modern consumption frameworks as well (Bocock, 1997).

Consumption is a means of communication as well. People in society will not understand the life and will not enjoy it without internalizing the styles and methods of consumption. Consumption is a discourse, a discourse about the contemporary society, the way society talks to itself (Baudrillard, 2004).

The twentieth century discourse is rooted in the evolving nature of the last years of the nineteenth century and its development has been influenced by evolutions resulting from fashion, transportation, correspondence, and communications. The growing urbanization and the developing cultural atmosphere related to the social realities and geographical and social mobility have also had an influential role. Consumerism is one of the economic phenomena which boomed after the industrial revolution. It became popular specially in the industrial countries and later on in the developing countries especially after the second world war. Governments and industries considered man as a consuming machine first in the industrial countries and then in the developing countries so that they could achieve their economic goals in terms of consistently increasing their benefits.

What does man want to achieve by totally giving in to the ideology of consumption? Obviously material delusions intimidate him/her and s/he is worried about material weaknesses such as decline in the purchasing power. Consumption is a defensive and social strategy we have institutionalized for confronting the real world. By consumption, we can get rid of the worldly fears and concerns and isolate these threats (Robins, 1999).

Political ideologies such as Fascism and Socialism could not create a unique behavior in society and make their supporters happy. The former politicized societies now seek happiness in the golden walls of consumption and its moral illusions. Consumption is both an ideological behavior and system of values and a communicational system (Baudrillard, 2004).

Consuming in its logical sense refers to the logical and appropriate use of the natural resources for survival and life. If we follow the historical line of the human civilization, we can see that the major part of the fights and wars started when human beings were able to store natural resources and the valuable properties.

Understanding the concept of consumption makes it easier to identify the dynamics of life that come along with modernity. Consumption is a key concept in the sense that it makes it possible to open the locks to understanding the modern society. Consumption is a concept infatuated with values. For example, in the current world the concept of "Open Market" was presented as a good society which, it is claimed, provides the logical consumers with wealth, goods, services, and the freedom to choose. In contrast, some focus on the dark side and the negative aspects of consumption and use contemptuous words such as consumerism, materialism, opportunism, egotism, and hedonism in their reference to consumption (Aldridge, 2003).

Consumerist citizens appear in different roles in these societies. Only when a consumer acts with the aim of maximizing his/her profits is he/she considered as a willful selector. This consumer is not only the motive force of the consumerist society but also the logical actor who is the most authorized person to select his/her interests. There are other roles for the consumer; the builder of relationship using symbols of consumption through different ways such as pretended consumption or leisure time, etc.; the discoverer; seeker of identity and position; a hedonist; the injured in the consumerist society; a fighter and activist; and a citizen.

## 3. The Modern Consumerism

Consumerism is the use of goods to satisfy one's needs and wants. The consumption-oriented society is the completed form of the industrial society, i.e., the market. This society is faced with a mass of produced goods

which are made easily accessible to the buyers, making them choose from a wide range of a specific type of commodity the one that they like the most.

In modern times, the importance of production was higher than the post-modern period. In the post-modern era, the importance of consumption has become greater and appealed to the masses. Baudrillard (as cited in Sarup, 1995) regards the period which he calls the consumption-oriented culture as a post-modern culture.

Modern consumerism is in fact a social damage which requires a scientific investigation and understanding to find an effective cure; in other words, a careful planning is required to confront it. Excessive consumerism is an international phenomenon and should be cured at two micro and macro levels. Consumerism should be considered in a wider social framework because today production and distribution have gone beyond the borders of a country and connected the most peripheral areas in a society to the most central ones. Modern consumerism was first developed in Europe after the advance of capitalism and was then spread to other countries. In the current circumstances, it is growing very fast and effectively in different countries. Capitalism had a main goal called 'making profit' from the very beginning when it first appeared. To achieve this goal, more production, sale, investment, and again production are considered as essential. To put it differently, in each cycle the goal is to sell more goods and gain more profits.

It was initially believed that higher classes are the main buyers of the capitalist goods, but then they found that mass production requires mass consumers as well. As high-class families were not large enough in volume, the need for mass consumers became apparent.

In primary productions, meeting biological needs of the consumers was considered as important, but as the biological needs of the consumers are limited in number, non-biological needs should be created in the consuming societies. Non-biological needs would also be limited, but the producers would not lose their mass production characteristic as one of their goals. For this purpose, false needs were created in the capitalist countries so that mass goods would be consumed fast. In other societies, this pattern prevailed and they either were gradually weakened or gave in to capitalism. Capitalism currently holds the patterns of production and consumption dominant in the world (Bocock, 1997).

In western countries, the modern life with its special mental and social features, paved the way for the promotion of consumerism. Initially, in the early twentieth century this special style with its new cultural patterns became popular among the upper- and middle-class urban population. Large shops were established in the cities and the culture of consumerism was encouraged. In this special culture, there was a slogan which became very popular, 'buy as much as you can and consume more'. The modern consumerist patterns and the establishment of different types of large shops under one ceiling made people habituated to consumption. People were in locations where they saw a large variety of goods. Simultaneously, Fashionism appeared based on which goods were promoted and consumed in a specific period of time. People were directed towards consuming goods in a limited period of time. Consumerism needed to be facilitated; therefore, the instruments of consumerism had to be developed and the next steps were taken in this way.

Audio, video, and written media became the main instruments for promoting goods. Two major instruments of consumerism became popular in the societies; numerous public auctions and the spread of credit cards. However, the modern human being is expected to go through more advanced and complicated stages in the field of modern consumerism. The new stages require opening up new horizons in terms of the ideology of consumption.

#### **4. The Ideology of Consumption**

Ideology is a system of clear ideas and judgments which are generally organized and interpret and explain the position or status of a group or society. Ideologies originate from our need to give meaning to the surrounding world. They make the incomprehensible look conceivable. Furthermore, each group has its own ideology (Boudon, 1989). Ideology is a part of each social whole in an organic form. Human societies create ideology as an essential element and atmosphere for historical breathing and life (Althusser, 1965), but some ideologies might impose a poisonous atmosphere and ask "what should human beings do?"

Critics of the capitalism are afraid of a world full of the scenarios of cultural wideness and dominance based on the attractions of the international capitalist because they believe it can promote consumerism by homogenizing the ideologies and cultures. The hidden attempt to globalize culture is supported by the world capitalism which attempts to convince the people all over the world to consume more than they really need to perpetuate the accumulation of wealth and capital and to meet the personal interests of some individuals. The culture and ideology of consumption claim that the meaning of life is manifested in the framework of the things we possess (Sklair, 1995).

Capitalism as a package containing at least economy, culture, technology, society, and mind entered the so-called non-capitalist countries in a historical trend. The goal of investment in these countries was to make excess profit. To achieve this goal, the ideology of consumerism should be preached in these countries. For this purpose, capitalism benefits from different factors. The most important factors in popularizing this ideology include merchants with a large capital, owners of the mass media, experts and artists in the media, retail stores, service-providing institutions, producers of goods, credit institutions, banks, and national and international companies.

Furthermore, in the developing countries the ideology of consumption is formed using certain methods; patterns of consumption are transferred to the developing countries; the media and especially the TV, travelers and other factors assist in the process; ideology is transferred through images (Kellner, 1995).

In the trend of globalization, the ideology of consumption becomes a part of everybody's life in the world. In this ideology, the consumerist citizen is considered as a target which should be influenced. This ideology like dictatorial ideologies limits citizens' freedom to choose. It finally leads the world to misery the consequences of which are irrecoverable for future generations.

If the mass population is not vaccinated, the consequences of the ideology of consumption will be more serious. First of all, it raises material expectations. These expectations are not usually met and cause suffering creating grave emotional and behavioral problems. It destroys people's self-confidence, creates false hopes which cause more suffering, makes human relationships worthless, and makes people feel estranged from normal affective reactions. This ideology attacks the people in different mental, social, and psychological ways and makes human relationships senseless.

One of the three applications of an ideology, according to Williams, is as follows: a system of illusory beliefs-false beliefs or false consciousness-which is established with the real or practical knowledge. This interpretation of ideology is similar to that of Marx and the Marxists. Bourgeois ideology keeps the proletariat in the state of false consciousness, an instrument the ruling capitalist class utilizes to finally perpetuate its thoughts and dominance and control over others. Consumption is also an example of an ideology that the capitalist system benefits from for this purpose. The ideology of consumption inculcates this belief that the meaning of life should be sought in what we consume and life is nothing but consumption (Williams, 1977).

Marxists and non-Marxists have come to the same general feeling that at a certain point in time after the second world war a new form of society appeared which has been described in different forms as similar to the post-industrial society, multinational capitalism, consumption-oriented society, media society, etc. Even some of them have moved beyond the criticism of modernism and convicted the post-modernism: It was witnessed that, in certain ways, postmodernism duplicates, reproduces and reinforces the capitalist and consumerist logic (Jameson, 1998: 7).

The prevalence of consumerism in poor countries has no result but destruction of the local industries and capitals. Many of the third world countries have been trapped in this ideology and encourage and promote the culture of consumption due to modeling the economic system of the advanced capitalist countries in which promoting the ideology of consumption is one of the main pillars for their economic development.

In the existing cultural context in these societies, the value of human being is constantly falling. The ideology of consumption in a consumerist society is reliant on a fetishist logic. (Baudrillard, 1995: 55).

## **5. The Consumerist Identities**

In the new era, new patterns of consumption are one of the basic elements of the human identity. For the majority of people and groups, supporting an ideology is an instrument of maintaining an identity. This instrument helps to satisfy special needs of individuals via self-assessment and social integration.

Business campaigns and virtual messages encourage people to consume and take a positive view of consumption. In this way, advertizing creates false needs. Trade organizations have to create and develop a special consumerist culture. By losing their social consciousness people assume their consumerist identities. By transferring the concept of prestige to the mass population, business organizations hope to create a person who can put his/her needs, exhaustion, and concerns in the framework of consumption to focus on the quality of life he/she used to organize by his/her work.

Consumerism appeared as a main social trend in the West, then in other parts of the world, and now in the third-world countries. The upper-class members of society use it as a sign to show their identity. The middle class members use it to show their high prestige and the lower class are trapped in false consumerism without knowing what they really need and what they don't and as time passes, they are more entrapped.

In this grave identity crisis, we can witness a great psychological and cultural misery. Reducing the cultural values to economic values creates a situation in the consumerist society in which accessibility of the products which are contrary to the essential needs for survival becomes a moral justification for political suppression. A human being who has been turned into a bolt in the powerful social machine loses his/her identity and originality. The contemporary human has a strong feeling of loneliness and to escape from it s/he joins a large whole and becomes a part of an organization, club, party or team. S/he solves him/herself in it to calm down. This feeling of loneliness has always caused suffering to the human beings and provoked different reactions in different societies.

Thinkers mainly emphasize the reaction that the contemporary human being shows, i.e., resorting to consumption. Excess in consumption which is in fact a 'yes' to the greedy who want to abuse human beings results from this feeling in human beings that they can regain their lost freedom and identity by consuming.

Fashion as one of the important trends in the consumerist society shows that even the least wealth exists right here right now and legitimizes the consumers and brings prestige only at the very present time. For the competing classes, it is easier to imitate and provide a high motivation for the spread of consumerism and its ideology among the different social classes. Fashion is a damaging reaction which conditions human beings. Reactive human is considered as an individual whose reactions make up his life (Giddens, 1990).

It is the consumerism and the life style of the citizens that create identities and distinguishes them from others.

### **6. Instruments Used by the Ideology of Consumption**

The ideology of consumption is the product of the industrial society. The current industrial society and economic giants and large companies make a perfect consumer out of the contemporary human being to achieve their goals and create false and unreal needs in humans using their great advertizing power. In line with that, they supply their apparently different and in reality the same products to the people and make them buy these products the major part of which is of no real use to them. The large advertising system introduces and describes the happy and successful individuals as those who are good and perfect consumers. The media in the capitalist system reflect the images and symbols instead of providing valuable information to their audience with the aim of creating new consumerist groups and strengthening the consumption atmosphere (Lull, 2001).

The mass media perpetuate the myth of consumerism as one of the new priorities of capitalism. Consumerism replaces other cultural experiences of the individual by satisfying the consumer's desire for ownership. The mass media play an important role perpetuating consumerism and the promotion of its position in the western societies. We are living in a virtual world in which the essence of the real world is prosecuted. We are witnessing the birth of a new global system by these releases (Robins, 1999).

In the ideology of consumption, children also have a special status. These little customers comprise a large part of the population in society. Children are an important target for their companies producing consumer products (Austin & Reed, 1999).

The contemporary man has become the puppet of hegemony and the ambitions of large companies which gradually gain control over the habits and values of human beings using their media power and mesmerizing promotional activities. In this way, they control our life style and what we consume from a distance. Consumerism and deceptive advertizing have become potential threats to the conscience. While a large number of the poor people in deprived countries are dying of hunger and malnutrition every day, in advanced countries billions of dollars are spent on advertizing inviting people to gluttony and consumerism, which has become a culture and is valued in these countries. International companies try to preach the ideology of consumption using the mass media such as newspapers, radio and television in different countries. Today, companies' attempts to sell their products is not limited to a simple advertisement. In fact, their advertisers try to create and change the cultures and create false needs in the countries using their special advertizing techniques and its development and also using their special instruments.

International companies have come to the conclusion that what causes the growth and promotion of their sale in the markets is the dominance over thoughts, choices and beliefs. Their method of advertisement is based on the fact that they should sell a concept rather than a product. In the literature on sociology, the mass media define advertisement as a way of building a relationship in return for money which usually has a motivational nature. Advertisement is the list of the wishes of a nation. Commercials are a pioneer in naturalizing and preaching consumption (Fairclough, 1995). TV advertisements can strongly change social values and present to society and institutionalize new values which are consistent with the ideology of consumption. The prevalence of this ideology will disarrange all the social structures because everything (wishes, desires, and emotions) has a virtual

basis. The symbols of the material elements of consumption are more highly emphasized than their real existence. Consumption is as much real as virtual (Lefebvre, 1998).

### **7. The Challenges of the Consumerist Society**

A consumerist society has many challenges. Before everything, postponing the joys to the future in the consumerist society is agonizing or impossible. Attempts for creating unsatisfiable consumers leads to the creation of a society in which values are diminished and humans are estranged. Individuals only live to consume and worship the brands of the goods (Debord, 1996).

Another feature of a consumption-oriented society is that various goods are constantly transformed and changed and you can rarely find a product with its original shape and form in the long term. Social life falls away from its regulations and the consumerist society turns into a cultural society, a culture in which symbols are recreated and the masses are under the magical influence of these symbols (Featherston, 1996).

We should consume to satisfy our internal needs. Indeed, human beings desire something when they feel a need in themselves for that thing. In fact, the pattern of consumption is the same as our list of the needs which vary across individuals and societies. In terms of motivational and psychological factors, when a person feels a need for something s/he will be motivated to obtain it. This finally leads to consumption. If we want to improve and solve the problem of consumption and consumption patterns, we should first care about our needs. In many of the cases, our feeling of the needs is not consistent with the reality. To put it more simply, many of the human beings feel a need for things that they do not really need and this feeling is mainly caused by peripheral issues such as the advertisements. Ultimately, this trend ends in an explosion or instigates a greater crisis. In the age of consumption, the world is senseless. Theories suffer from nihilism. Everything is corrupted, explicit, and on the move all the time. Under these conditions, there is a possibility of another internal explosion or collapse (Best & Kellner, 1998).

Another consequence of consumerism which leads society towards mental poverty and other social damages is luxury. Where luxury does not recognize any borders, there is no sign of making economy. The consumerist society is not a treasure box of economy but the society of credit cards. It is the society of the present time, the society of wishes and desires and it hates having to wait (Bauman, 1999).

On the other hand, consumerism is an obstacle to development because it leads to inadequate investment and prevents the development of infrastructure. It creates a gap between different social classes. This social gap which causes increased social discrimination, increases spread of the foreign culture in society. Indeed, the more imbalanced the distribution of wealth and income in society, the faster the spirit of consumerism will prevail and spread in society. The source of income will be the basic factor contributing to the spirit of consumerism, large incomes will be acquired via embezzlement and not production, and the spirit of consumerism will prevail very quickly. The capitalist system will not survive without consumerism. Capitalists put the markets of other countries on the agenda. Threats to the resources, environmental pollutions, social gap, and bad individual and social behaviors are among the complications of this phenomenon. When there is not an adequate infrastructure for production and making income and consumption is emphasized at the same time, many social damages will exacerbate the situation.

Today, we are under the siege of consumption and profusion of material services, objects, and goods. Laying siege to humans by humans has ended and now we are witnessing the siege of human by objects. There is no daily trading between the people and dealings are conducted by acquiring and manipulating the goods and messages (Foster, 1988).

One of the most important characteristics of a consumerist society is accumulation and abundance, the abundance of everything such as clothes, foods, etc. Putting the goods on show or supplying them displays accumulation as much beyond what it is in reality. This means 'pretended excess' or in other words scarcity. The effective form of profusion becomes manifest on "shows". Modern show of the objects involves putting the range of things which complement each other on show and giving the right to choose. The size of shows is indicative of their power. The power of the church makes people worship God and the power of large exhibitions draws them to the temple of consumerism (Miller, 1981).

In the old purchasing system, the seller was not an important factor, but in the new system a major part of the exhibition involves the sellers' attempt to persuade customers to buy. Therefore, a rise and improvement in sales comes along with the improvement of sellers' abilities. Employees have become a part of the new form of the alienated work. The selling employee is not just a normal individual but the brand mask and the standard framework welcoming the buyer. Pretentious kindness and friendship with the customers is an aspect of the

personalized services or public relations of the large companies. Furthermore, women not only have improved their role in the context of the consumerist society but also have had an important role in the development of this society in different ways such as starting women's magazines and by occupying the mass media institutions. Especially young women have an important role by supplying goods and services as an important aspect of demonstrating the consumerist society. This is followed by the attempt to standardize the display of the seller; in fact, the discipline and friendliness in MacDonald shopping centers are a clear example of standardization of the sales (Ritzer, 1997).

### **8. The Role of Political Management**

In order to correctly understand the role of political management of the consumption pattern, the importance of the interactional relationship between politics and ideology should be taken into account. Ideology is the sensitive and definitive aspect of the politics, is based on understanding the reality, matching the illusions against the reality and evaluating the reality, and acts as a map selecting the approach and interpretation of the politics. From this perspective, ideology leads, supports, limits, and actualizes the political actions. At the same time, it is used as the greatest stimulating force of the political actions of the masses. Ideology is the most incisive aspect of the politics. Without ideology there is no politics and vice versa.

The ideology of consumption is rooted in social structures and only one of the existing institutions in society such as the family, politics, economy or culture cannot be considered as responsible for the existing conditions. If political managers do not try to find a solution to this social, economic, political and cultural problem with the cooperation of social experts, the societies in different countries will not be able to escape from this whirlpool of the ideology of consumption.

The danger is that consumers have recently noticed the political power they have in the framework of a collective purchasing power. On the other hand, political management might encourage the masses to boycott some goods. Encouraging the people by the political management to make savings and investments, presenting correction patterns of consumption, and preparing the ground for economic activities are some of the important factors in logical management of the consumption.

A part of the duties of the ruling system is to provide educations related to correct consumption at higher levels of society. Undoubtedly, the political system's determination to correct and improve the patterns of consumption is based on understanding, their feeling of the need, and the social readiness for improving the current conditions. Therefore, the political system authorities should focus on finding an intelligent, logical, fair, and satisfying solution for improving people's consumption patterns. Participation in the political language is dependent on the level of awareness. Today, it is clear that people's participation in social events whether political, economic, or cultural is the most important factor in social dynamicity, mobility, and development. Citizens in such a political system have a disciple-mentor relationship with the system. Therefore, the political system can play an important role in correcting the consumption pattern; it can eliminate the obstacles, provide the appropriate conditions and facilities preparing the ground for the development and emergence of an appropriate consumption pattern.

### **9. Conclusion**

Getting rid of the ideology of consumption means thinking about the material and spiritual growth of the human being. From this perspective, resistance against the damages imposed by the ideology of consumption can be the starting point for a big fight. Today, great industrial powers which have become globalized and transnational make decisions on behalf of human beings and impose the values of the ideology of consumption on the masses in society using their great media and advertising power equipped with the most updated psychological techniques. For correcting and improving the patterns of consumption none of the institutions in society can move independently. It is the coordination between the social structure and functions with a logical political management that can confront the damages imposed by the ideology of consumption.

The nineteenth century was managed by an orientation towards production and the twentieth century by the ideology of consumption. It is now widely known that these patterns are damaging. There is a need for inventing a new pattern of life. The ideology of consumption led to the development of artificial habits and more consumption and acts on this basis. This ideology increases our capacity for unconscious control and manipulates it. There are scientific evidence to show that all these can be changed.

Consumerism makes the economy of third-world countries more dependent. If the patterns of consumption are corrected in these countries, a new pattern can be presented in which lack of extravagance, contentment, economy and balanced consumption have a special status. If this new pattern resists against the attack of

capitalism, the future generations in the third-world countries will be able to transcend the barriers of the ideology of consumption.

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