

Rethinking Consumption in Late Modernity: Throwaway Society vs Eco-Village

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At first it seems like a conventional little village. You stop to look around. There is something deeply peaceful in the atmosphere. After exploring and spending some time with the residents it is not long before you get a feeling that the residents of this community seem to be better off with a greater sense of wellbeing. For these people, in one of the many eco-villages springing up around the world, 'consumerism' no longer has the meaning it has for many others on our weary planet. For the most part they consume what they grow and make themselves, trade resources instead of money and some use waste as an energy source. For others, living the conventional western capitalist life, the bumper sticker 'I owe, I owe, it's off to work I go' isn't funny. It is simply true.

According to Moorehouse (1983), in our culture, people's central life interest is no longer work, but consumption. In other words, it could be said that we no longer consume in order to live, but we live in order to consume. Or, as the bumper sticker says, we work to consume. We consume more than we need, we seek identity in our possessions and we fall prey to the alluring fantasies portrayed in our world of marketing and advertising (Dittmar, 1992).

All of this consuming inevitably creates a lot of waste product. Landfill and toxic water has become a real issue.

This, however, does not seem to be making much impact on Joe Public due to what Goffman (1959) proposes is a 'back stage' activity, helping to support the ongoing, unthinking consumption and waste cycle of urban life. For example: garbage men take away our waste in the early hours before we wake up, or while we are at work and we never see the huge landfill areas or experience the tons of garbage leaving our cities and towns. It is a case of 'out of sight, out of mind' (Nicosia and Mayer, 1976).

There is, however, a growing concern, although perhaps only amongst a very small minority, about waste and world-wide careless use of natural resources (O'Brien, 2007; Lowe, 1998; Baudrillard, 1994). Our very survival depends on the environment and we cannot separate ourselves

from it, although many people seem oblivious to our responsibility towards the planet we live on – or perhaps feel helpless to do anything about it. Despite the odd television

documentary on sustainability or the

trouble our environment is in, the most we see that pays homage to the problem is a plea from our local councils to recycle more of our waste, or donate to a charity of some kind. For many, this is as far as they go to 'do their bit' for the planet.

Consequently, waste and over-consumption is largely ignored by the general population who are caught up in a maelstrom of different calls to action and conflicting messages. In the current



economic downturn consumers are urged to spend and consume as an essential medium towards sustaining the economy (Hinton and Goodman, 2010). On the other hand they are being urged towards frugality. They are told to 'recycle' but seldom is packaging reduced. No eco-friendly message can possibly be heard above the bombardment of calls to spend and buy more 'stuff'.

The diagrams and measurements published by Roland Clift et al. (2010) present a worrying outlook if we continue on the path we are on right now. The Earth, being a finite planet, has a limited capability to supply resources and to absorb pollution (Clift et al., 2010; Ayres and Kneese, 1969). The 2005 Millennium Ecosystem Assessment found that during the past 50 years human beings have altered ecosystems quicker and more extensively than in any equivalent time period in our history, all of which has been primarily to meet growing levels of consumption. This has, arguably, resulted in a substantial and largely irreversible loss in the diversity of life on Earth.

This leaves us with the question of how to deal with the issues our materialist world is causing. Changing the way our society works and how we think is more than just a social issue, it is also an issue of relationship and identity. It isn't easy choosing to walk or cycle in a society where all your friends have posh cars in a society where you are often judged by your possessions. Or wearing recycled clothing as a teenager who is all about fitting in with designer-clad peers. These are just tiny examples of the ways we use possessions to define who we are and also to influence the attitude of others towards us (Dittmar, 1992; Markus and Nurius, 1986).

The influence of advertising creates a fantasy land whereby we are unconsciously, or even consciously, influenced to place latent meaning on goods we own (Williamson, 1986). From a post-structuralist perspective we have freedom, if

somewhat limited, through our consumer behaviour (Bauman, 1988). The seductive media, pushing us to buy, buy, buy, pushes us until our purchasing impulse and our bank balance collide., often with disastrous results to our personal economic status (Baudrillard, 1988).

It is quite feasible that the eco-village could be utilised by mainstream society as a small example of what larger society could model itself upon. Eco-villagers, although not all, have chosen through what Laerman (1993) has termed 'new existentialism' i.e. to live an everyday life where their identity is more about family, sustainability, affordable housing and limiting stress.

It is a compelling model that could grow and allow many more to make this paradigm shift, and it certainly does need a paradigm shift to force attention away from creating our identity through possessions, social climbing and consumerism and instead placing it firmly in a moralistic framework of community, caring for the environment and eliminating waste issues (Kasper, 2008).

The move towards a more sustainable 'off the grid' style of living, could be seen as a move against postmodern mass-produced commodity culture, shifting away from buying global goods to buying

local goods, and for growing our own food for example. Where we consume less there is less to dispose of. If, where possible, waste is used for fuel or recycled, we can move away from the so called 'throwaway culture' and take a stand against consumerist advertising (Whitely, 1987).

The question arises, would this create more problems in terms of economic instability? As mentioned, are we not also called upon to consume in order to sustain the movement of money in the system? If we stop consuming, what will happen to all the factories and their employees who rely on products being constantly replaced or upgraded for their survival?

Where do 'thrift', caring for our environment, and 'spend to survive' meet? Is it a losing battle to try to convince people to change their attitudes about



waste and over-consumption? Is our society too well programmed towards a modern lifestyle of 'keeping up with the Joneses' to change now?

Will we have to wait for a lack of clean water, no fuel for cars and heating and rising conflict to change our minds, open our eyes and wake us up? This is the view of John Urry (2010) – and perhaps he is right. On the other hand, ecological change due to pollution or political instability may have more cultural, agricultural and economic impact. Whatever happens in the future without us taking positive choices as eco-warriors, life will not remain the same.

Zygmunt Bauman (2004) writes that society is currently in a state of flux. His thesis on 'liquid modernity' asserts that a stable period is behind us. We are, it seems, moving into a transformative period where the only thing that is constant will be change.

It is easy to take a dim view of modern society and expect a breakdown in structure and systems and the spread of insecurity as a part of this sea of change. With this view in mind, it is also easy to see how living in an eco-village would create more security. Eco-villages are not yet (and perhaps never will be) wholly independent. Their ethos makes their lives 'more' sustainable, but they are not wholly self-sustaining. Nevertheless, having adapted to less consumerism perhaps any major changes in modern society would, perhaps, not affect them as much.

As word spreads, and it can't but help spreading in this high technology world, it is very possible that consumers will voluntarily embrace a more sustainable life where hyper-consumerism and issues with waste become a part of our past we look back on with horror, thanking our lucky stars we didn't end up totally destroying our planet as we know it.

Perhaps the call to a more 'real' life will entice more and more people to embrace sustainability. According to Nozick (1974) people would choose reality, with all the emotions, positive and negative, rather than a false happiness. He goes as far as to state that even the chemically addicted would not sacrifice real life for 'false pleasures'.

What predominantly differentiates the ecovillage model of sustainable living from conventional neighbourhoods, towns, and cities, is an increased belief in family, community, and an internalised ethic towards our environment, which is intrinsically and vitally a part of our survival.

I do believe that these small enclaves of eco-warriors could be a model for future civilisation. As change happens, as we feel the pinch of economic downturn, and as we become more risk averse to taking the chance on inaction, I believe that these free thinking, foresighted people will have proved for us that there is an alternative way of life to gobbling up the earth and digging a bottomless pit in search of meaning where none exists.

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Picture 1:

<http://www.archiprix.org/2013/index.php?project=3059>

Picture 2:

<http://www.ewaste.com.au/ewaste-articles/future-electronic-waste-recycling-televisions-computers/>