

How the Obsession with the Self creates Global Warming

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Self-esteem, self-worth, vanity and the need to feel positive about ourselves, seems to be a prominent aspect of society's everyday life in the Twenty-first century. The idea of 'beauty', 'accomplishment', 'wealth' and 'self-centeredness' has always been a somewhat dominant area of a community. However, recently it has become the main focus of how we function as a society.

'Self-esteem or self-worth refers to a person's subjective appraisal of himself or herself as intrinsically positive or negative' (Sedikides and Gregg, 2003, cited in newworldencyclopedia, 2015: n.p.), and vanity is the 'excessive pride in one's appearance, qualities and achievements etc.' (dictionary.com, n.d.)

All these terms can be exhibited in many ways such as purchasing expensive makeup, bizarre animals or expensive cars. Any form of gaining self-esteem, self-worth and vanity, can have a devastating effect on the world. Science has identified several main causes of global warming and climate change and has made

suggestions and given advice as to how to slow down this process. However, sociology can also give some reasons as to how these scientific causes may have come about over the last 200 years or so. This essay will aim to identify how it may be doing this through globalisation and consumption theories and will also attempt to examine how risk may be involved.

The term 'global warming' was coined in 1975 by the oceanographer Wallace Smith Broecker in the paper: "Climate Change: Are we on the Brink of a Pronounced Global Warming?" (Wallace-Wells, 2017). Records of global warming and climate change began

to circulate many areas including science, climatology, geography and astronomy, as early as the 1700s. Seitz and Hite (2012) report that a change in the global climate is taking place due to the burning of large amounts of fossil fuels, leading to a significant increase of the CO₂ in the Earth's atmosphere,



though other gases such as methane, nitrous oxides and chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) have also contributed to this change in the global climate. This is evident by the increasing, warmer temperatures (warmer winters in the UK), violent weather (storms such as hurricane Ophelia), sea levels rising, coral reefs dying and declining (for example, in Australia), air pollution (City centres), agriculture failure (all over the world), and the disruption of natural eco systems (such as that of a rainforest due to deforestation).

This knowledge is predominantly scientific and does not suggest how humans managed to achieve such disastrous outcomes. According to NASA (2017), the intergovernmental panel on climate change's fifth report showed that 'a group of 1,300 independent scientific experts from countries all over the world under the auspices of the United Nations, concluded there is a more than 95% probability that human activities over the past 50 years have warmed our planet. Such activities have been enhanced since the Industrial Revolution, at the end of the 18th century, due to new mechanical inventions and intensive usages, bringing about the concept of globalisation.

Globalisation has been argued over by many different professions over the years, as to when it began. O'Rourke and Williamson (2002) considered three predominant

perspectives which argue for; 1492, 1498 and that which globalization had essentially ended before the 19th century. However, they concluded that globalisation 'began in the early 19th century. In that sense, suggesting it is a modern phenomenon.' Jeffrey (2002), a journalist for the Guardian, suggests globalization has become a buzz word some individuals use to describe anything, stating that globalisation is a global system based on economy, business and production, which produces a large amount of people with products being sold and created, many to enhance one's self-esteem, self-worth and vanity.

With the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, came the excessive use of machinery and a plethora of other inventions in the 19th century, such as batteries, gas lighting, steam powered locomotives and the early refrigerator. Since then, many more inventions have been introduced to the global

market, such as vehicle transport, non-biodegradable plastic and mass nuclear weapons, as well as excessive human activity such as waste disposal, large carbon footprints and deforestation.

While some of this technological advancement has provided positive progression for certain countries, at least in a socio-economic sense, a by-product of this advancement is the use of such produce to improve self-esteem, not to mention the enormous change in the global climate.



One small area of globalisation is the activity of human consumption. 'It is the process by which goods and services are, at last, put to final use by people' (Goodwin et al. 2008: 1). Sørensen (2013) makes note of the abundance of objects of consumption available in modern society, with every individual being a consumer tempted by brands and products, or are convinced by particular ideas of self-images, suggesting the consumer is forced to consume. This conveys progression from a 'producer society' to a 'consumer society'; one which 'people often buy new goods, especially goods they do not need, and which a high value is placed on owning many things' (Cambridge Dictionary, 2017: n.p.).



Production and consumption share a symbiotic relationship. Ransome (2005) illustrates the necessity of mass consumption superseding mass production and emphasised that 'mass consumption is not just about the scale on which things are produced and consumed, it is also about perceptions of the social location and status of those that are doing the consuming' (Ransome, 2005: 53). Products are produced and consumed at an alarming rate which is damaging the environment and causing global warming. Ransome's typology of simple and complex consumption can explain why this might be happening. According to him, simple consumption is 'strictly *necessary*' in the sense that we cannot avoid ... we have no choice but to consume food, drink and the materials used for clothing, housing and protection...' (Ransome, 2005: 66). Complex consumption is

the opposite. 'This category is therefore largely made up of acts of consumption which are deemed by the actor to provide satisfaction of something more than basic needs ... The satisfactions and pleasures produced though complex consumption can be achieved by a variety of means' (Ransome, 2005: 67).

This can therefore be applied to the question in hand, as the considerable amount of

consumption caused by the effects of self-esteem, self-worth and vanity is vast. In terms of what is actually produced, bought and used when talking

about complex consumption, examples such as electricity in the form of social media (e.g. 'Facebook') or online shopping (e.g. 'Amazon') has surged over the last 23 years or so. As well as mass transportation, non-biodegradable plastic food wrapping and CO₂ emissions.

The fact that we do not only consume necessary products, suggests that society has progressed into an age of consumption, and self-esteem, self-worth and vanity have an effect on global warming and seem to have dire consequences. In Goodwin et al.'s (2008) paper they show how big the scale of this problem can get as 'the average U.S. resident, in a year, consumes 275 pounds of meat, uses 635 pounds of paper, and uses energy equivalent to 7.8 metric tons of oil' (ibid.: 3). If these statistics were to be true globally, in years to come, we would no longer be able to live on this planet.

All types of consumption, lead to the further degradation of the Earth. For example, transport and electricity causes an overload of CO₂ emissions from power plants and engines; the constant demand for wood and paper are rendering some trees and animals endangered or extinct; or the non-biodegradable waste from products and wrapped food. The products, which are so widely used to increase self-esteem etc., are also reducing the capacity for our world to be saved. However, not all waste is produced by individuals wishing to boost their self-confidence, neither is it all bad for the environment. According to the Guardian, 'Envirowise says that approximately 70% of office waste is recyclable, but on average only 7.5% reaches a recycling facility' (The Guardian, 2008: n.p.). On the other hand, rather than going to a landfill site, waste such as paper, some plastic, metal and wood can be recycled and made into another product or left to decompose.

Furthermore, science has developed a multitude of ways in which the rate of human consumption can be done in a humane way and not reducing the Earth's life span. The way people use 'modern necessities' such as transport and electricity have been identified and can now be used as a renewable source. For example, solar panels are used to heat water etc. and electric cars reduce the amount of carbon emissions. However, these are not sources which are either widely affordable or available in certain circumstances. This search for solutions to man-made problems is what Ulrich Beck calls 'Risk society', for him, 'modernity is a world that introduces global risk parameters that previous generations have not had to face' (Elliott, 2002: 295). Regarding this essay title, self-esteem, self-worth and vanity are all relatively new ideologies that society has to deal with, as well

as the increased use of fossil fuels etc., in order to create something desirable to combat both the problems with the self and global warming.

To conclude, scientific evidence shows how fast the environment is deteriorating. Further evidence as to what is causing this deterioration has been introduced by the industrial revolution leading to globalisation and mass consumption. It is not only individuals who create harmful waste and pollution, for example large companies can also have a big effect. Ransome's typology, however, gives us reason to believe that self-esteem, self-worth, and vanity influence the human need to 'want to buy', having a detrimental effect on the environment, thus contributing to global warming.

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