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The Environmental Mantra of What is Environmental Is Itself Social: A Transdisciplinary Study of Interactions between Human Beings and the Environment

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Abstract

This paper seeks to position the old theme of environmental (in)justice at the intersections of social and environmental forms. Such positioning is a sine qua non condition for rethinking the concept of (in)justice itself. In bringing together two seemingly different notions: society and the environment, different militant movements succeed in unravelling the seeds of a multi-faceted (in)justice mainly in relation to race, class, and gender. Postmodern consumerism makes individuals consider solely their interests at the expense of collective and ecological interests and considerations. In fulfilling materialistic desires, people condone social and natural decay. Such consumerist behaviour reshapes the human relationship with nature. This societal and environmental alienation is explained by the fact that individuals tend to consume images and signs rather than tangible objects. It is about a form of consumption manipulated by advertizing and medializing tools. In light of Baudrillard's philosophy of postmodernism and his reading of consumer societies, problems of nature persist because of the passive reception of natural catastrophes and lack of awareness about nature. Hence, to start repairing the human affiliation with nature, people need first to be aware of the hegemonic influence of consumerism as operating through advertizing, entertainment, and shopping. Uncritical behaviours open for discussion the human relationship with consumer society on the one hand and with nature on the other hand. Natural environments, which used to offer solace and stir imagination and reflection, are being replaced with sites of consumption ruining the cordial relationship with nature. Thus, the analysis of consumerism from an ecocritical perspective implies the problematization of this notion as largely affecting nature and engendering a form of human estrangement from the environment in general.

Keywords: *environmental (in)justice, postmodern consumerism, consumer society, empathic relationship with nature, ecocritical perspective*

Introduction

In the postmodern condition, the powerful advertizing and medializing tools succeed in dissolving the unity between human beings and nature. They alter the perception of nature and the environment in general. Furthermore, with the continual growth of sites of consumption, incorporating supermarkets and shopping malls, human beings find themselves more attracted to the accumulated signs of services and goods provided. The work on the architecture of such sites to make them spaces of entertainment and consumption at once further exacerbates the human alienation from natural places. The latter are rather embraced in advertisements that do not reflect reality. In this respect, Scott Hess elaborates on the idea that the postmodern pastoral representation accentuates that the product “rather than nature, [...] guarantees pastoral fulfillment” (79). He comments on the way “the entire advertizing industry is structured in a pastoral mode, promising a life of perfect leisure and secular happiness without effort, simply by buying the correct product” (78). As Baudrillard also claims: “Work, leisure, nature, culture... are now at last mixed and blended, climatized and homogenized in the same sweeping vista of perpetual shopping” (29-30).

Even though cultural and social systems are established by individuals, they sometimes go unnoticed or remain unquestioned mainly if these systems fit the interests of people in power. Stereotyping as well as the material representation of certain practices in the form of cultural values and social beliefs reinforce the acceptance of such ideas in people’s minds as norms that may develop into social biases and damage the environment for diversity. For example, in treating the issue of racism in relation to diversity, opposite beliefs in the sameness of people strengthen the avoidance and ignorance of racial categories. Second, the belief in difference and multiculturalism celebrates the valuation of differences among social groups.

Different research works have been directed to the treatment of such dilemma arising from the tension between the two beliefs. Ecofeminists, for example, have helped tame the situation in their introduction of differences as instigators for social change incorporating the cutting with racial inequality. They emphasize heterogeneity within society as a panacea since it promotes mutualism between social categories and alleviates the obsession with homogenization as it risks falling into non-identity.

Furthermore, multiculturalism has drawn strength from the various groups that it encompasses (racial, ethnic, religious ...) It is an ideology that fosters the recognition and acceptance of different cultural groups with their various backgrounds, experiences, and endeavours. Such appreciation cannot occur without the admittance of the culture of those groups and that no culture is superior or inferior (Berry, *Cultural*). It is about cultural coexistence within pluralistic societies.

However, though multicultural approaches have some potential to facilitate intercultural relations, it is still limited mainly at the practical level. This limitation appears in the limited ability to alter dominant realities. Also, the idealistic multicultural approach to handling diversity may lead to inattention to treat radical racial inequalities in depth. Exclusionary practices continue to damage the social fabric even though beliefs in multiculturalism appear to reign in certain societies. This is mainly because certain majority groups embrace neutrality or theoretical acceptance with so little implementation of diversity science and undoing social exclusion.

The best way to create better environments for diversity is to acknowledge the multiple layers of difference within a vibrant interaction between diverse groups and even opposite polarities.

I. Underpinning Consumerist Behaviours

Jean Baudrillard is a cultural critic who has a different view of objects of consumption from Marx. The latter “believes that an object or a commodity has natural use-value.” (Habib 44). From a Marxist viewpoint, then, the object’s value lies in its usefulness and durability. However, Baudrillard thinks that an object rather has a sign-value, a sign of the consumer’s status and prestige. It may also work as a social differentiator as in postmodern society, the consumer usually exposes what he purchases in order to distinguish himself socially. Contrarily, irrational consumption risks integrating the consumer into a homogeneous category of consumers in which everyone in the same category is using the same objects of consumption under the pressure of social media and the attraction of advertising. Commenting on the overpowering television effect on modern culture, the Canadian media critic, Macluhan, in an interview with Playboy, concludes that television “tattoos its message directly onto our skin” Michael Kelly also observes: “Everything becomes an image, a sign, a spectacle” (quoted in Baudrillard, *Culture* 104).

Categorization of consumers naturally leads to hierarchy and fragmentation. Importantly, social hierarchies are bound by a fixed system of fixed hierarchies of signs making movement from one social class to another quite difficult. At the surface level, the consumer is in a position to choose to use his objects of consumption. At a deeper level, the consumer is mentally controlled by the group he always wants to guarantee the same level of its hierarchy. In fact, in the logic of consumption lies the true obsession of consumers, which is the sign not the value of objects. Hence, Baudrillard replaces the Marxist belief in the natural use-value of the object with a belief in the cultural sign value of it. He shows that the constant search for sign-value, implying a search for rank and prestige, exacerbates the modern consumer’s alienation and fatigue. It not only dissolves the essence of community but also handicaps the project of individuality. It causes the loss of self and Other.

Baudrillard’s influential book on consumerism, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*, examines this social trend toward obsession with consuming both essential and non-essential goods and services. Baudrillard comments on the way this obsession causes numerous negative effects such as environmental decay and social inequality. Accordingly, the different sections of the book aim at working on the dark shades of consumer culture in the modern world.

In the first chapter of the book, titled “The Myth of Consumption,” Baudrillard negates the belief that purchasing objects of consumption causes happiness. He rectifies that it is people’s attachment to these things, mainly unneeded ones, causes them agony. It is a form of personal suffering that may generate a collective one. In the second section, Baudrillard sheds light on the power of advertising and social media in influencing people’s purchasing desires and shifting preferences to make them exceed a willingness to buy a specific item/service to satisfy a specific need. They generate further demand and seduction, driving contemporary society into a consumer society, *par excellence*. He also elaborates on the way individuals become defined by what they consume rather than defining what they consume. In other words, individuals fall into the status of the object.

In the third section, “The Processes of Consumption,” Baudrillard deals with the phenomenon of mass consumption as automatically leading to mass production, a reality that generates to an important extent alienated laborers and declined expertise. Mass consumption also has led to certain economic insecurity with some countries becoming overly dependent on exports and others on imports. The final section, “The Culture of Consumption” illuminates the dark shade of consumer culture and its contribution to the collapse of important social notions such as community integration.

Professor Munther Mohd. Habib adds emphasis to the issue of consumerism to clarify that in the practice of uncontrollable consumption. There is a practice of simulation that implies “engross[ing] humans into so huge a cycle of unnecessary abundance that it seemingly carries death in all aspects of life in the postmodern society” (“Culture” 45). Such simulation makes consumer identities replace authentic identities because of the obsession with conformity. People target to fit into group consumer identities rather than seeking individuality and originality.

II. Living Righteously on Earth and Communally with Nature

The human race’s obsession with consumerism and preoccupation with materialism have a grave impact not only on the environment but also on the individual in multiple ways. Buying products beyond needs just to satisfy specific wants often results in useless purchases that add no real value to the buyer but have bad long-term effects on the environment and society.

Studies show that in the wake of climate-related calamities, women are more likely to be preyed on by sexual and domestic aggression mainly post a disaster. The fact that irrational consumerism may accelerate environmental degradation hence disasters and domestic violence is more visible in the cases of women who are already suffering from poverty and lack of agency and their vulnerability is more intensified.

Advertisements make individuals trapped in the vicious circle of mindless consumerism. They push them always into chasing products branding new and thus dissatisfied with what they already own. Consumerist behaviours automatically increase demand and thus production. The latter largely depends on the use of land and natural resources leading in many cases to deforestation and pollution.

In other words, consumerism is a concern that crucially needs to be elaborated on hand in hand with the theme of the environment. Knowing that increased consumption leads naturally to an increased exploitation of the earth, more damage to the ecosystem, and further pollution of the air, soil, and water urges a revision of uncontrolled consumer behaviours. To sum up, overconsumption+overproduction=environmental decay and social inequality is a multi-layered equation whose starting point may be healed only through adopting a more conscious and responsible attitude while consuming.

Starting from Atkin’s assumption, which is the title of his well-known book on consumerism, “climate change is the symptom, consumer culture is the disease,” the first generator of environmental ills is then the illusion that material goods are the sole stabilizers of well-being and success within a capitalist society. As Firat et al further explain this idea: “Consumption in our society is a social process. Buying more means having a higher social status” (“Consumption”). Fuelling this ideology is most profitable for the industries that can maximize their profits

regardless of the different environmental prices paid because of the waste generated out of production and the burning of fossil fuels.

Facing climate change may start with a revolutionary social change. Awareness and willingness are crucial factors in reducing consumption and establishing new standards of higher societal status other than unceasing purchasing habits. The more environmentally-conscious is the person, the more socially positioned and acknowledged he becomes is a belief that may reshuffle existing norms (Harrabin, 2020). The UK’s experience with this growing issue is seen in attempts at reducing the “throw-away culture” (2020). New actions are taken to ensure the durability and reusability of the produced items such as phones, batteries, and textiles and their repair in case they are defective or broken. The aim is to render the process of production more reasonable and eco-friendly.

Many slogans binding humanity and nature have spread as an endeavour to reshape consumer culture. Among these slogans are “If you hurt nature, you are hurting yourself” and “if you lose relationship with nature, you lose relationship with humanity” (Krishnamurti 1983). Living communally with nature entails feeling its elements with all the human senses. It is about meditating on its splendor, hearing its sounds, and smelling its freshness. This relationship with nature also makes the individual sink into a unique feeling about it. A feeling that takes the viewer beyond considering nature for solely utilitarian purposes. He/she is not going just to seek to enjoy the shade of a tree or the flesh of an animal, he/she will be part of it and one with it, belong to all its elements with a profound admiration for them. Such reconsideration of the human place in nature naturally brings about a revision of the human place in the world. It issues more affection for others notwithstanding gender, racial or social differences. Thus, communion with nature often boosts feelings of empathy and reduces sentiments of cruelty and tension.

The care for the human surroundings needs to be as spontaneous as the care for the natural surroundings. It needs to be free from thoughts of usefulness/uselessness, division or containment. The observational eye with which the individual perceives nature generates a form of beauty, which exceeds the physical form. It is a beauty springing from the quality of communion with the rivers, the birds, and the glitter on the water.

Conclusion

The movement from consumer to prosumer, from exhaustible to renewable, from self-centered society to eco-friendly behavior is the project of conscious consumerism. It is built on the cruciality of being mindful of one’s consumption habits and their environmental, social, and economic impact. In other words, while capitalism can provide opportunities for economic success and social well-being, it’s also crucial to maintain a sense of balance and consider the broader impact of one’s choices on both self and society. A good lifestyle is subjective and varies from person to person. Hence, one needs to consciously define what success and well-being mean to him/her and tailor his/her lifestyle accordingly.

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