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# CONSUMPTION - THE VOCABULARY OF GOOD SOCIAL LIFE/14

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## NO FREEDOM WITHOUT THE MARKET. THE MARKET ALONE DOES NOT BRING HAPPINESS

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The centrality of consumption is a fact of our society that is neither new nor typical. What is rather new and important, however, is our inability to grasp the pervasiveness of the culture of consumption and annuities, an unfortunate common feature of many a fallen civilization. The **phenomenon** of consumption has **very ancient roots**, and it is a good thing in general because when goods for consumption are denied, rights and freedoms are denied, too.

*Homo sapiens* not only had to consume in order to survive, but has always spoken with words and with goods, from the pearls donated to the people who came from the sea to the cake that we found on Christmas morning on the door mat at home - in return for hanging a card on the door of the new neighbours the night before: the two 'things' have spoken before our (shy) words.

However, the previous civilizations had learned, often at a great cost, that **the consumption of things should be taught**, oriented and also **limited**. In medieval culture this truth was absolutely central. Just think of the substance of '*sumptuary laws*' in medieval towns, the **norms that regulated the consumption of luxury goods** - from the length of the court-train of clothes (which added up to several meters ) to the height of towers and steeples.

Today we tend to look at these ancient laws from a purely moralistic perspective. In fact there was a message for us today which starts from the empirical and non-ideological observation of the **individual and collective damages produced by intemperate, unlimited and unrestrained consumption**, especially of those goods that contemporary economists call '*positional goods*'. There are, in fact, consumer goods that are not **bought** for typical use of property, but to confront and compete with others, or to '**position oneself**' in **social hierarchies**. Yesterday they were clothes, homes and cars: these were the goods used to enter among the 'competitors' of the city. Today these '*positional goods*' have dramatically increased in number, and they are not just cars and luxury boats but also smartphones and many other goods that we consume also to confront and compete with others.

It is here that you need to open the argument on **the consumption of new technological goods** that turn on our imagination, the ones associated with post-modern and '*smart*' self images and the ones that make us queue for hours in front of the stores when new models are launched. Taking a closer look at these new forms of consumption, we might find out things that are perhaps not discussed enough. If, however, they were, first of all we would become aware that these new consumer goods are **the products of a powerful industry** that moves an immense capital, which is post-modern as regards the types of goods, but is very traditional in terms of tax avoidance. These forms of consumption are empowered by huge investments in advertising and are placed at the centre of the capitalist system which grows by feeding them.

**The side effects of this great 'positional machine' are many.** The first is the radical **impoverishment of the most vulnerable classes** who waste their ever decreasing income on positional consumption. The growth of usury is impressive among the poor when they want to buy these new consumer 'goods' only to end up stealing bread from their and our children. A second effect has to do with the **displacement of resources** that the huge investment to improve the efficiency and comfort of mobile phones and tablets produced with respect to '*non- positional*' or common sectors (e.g. art) or those that are essential for the moral quality of our society

but offer insufficient economic return (e.g. *rare diseases*). A third effect directly involves our being. Many studies, including those of Nobel laureate **Daniel Kahneman** have been telling us for over a decade that the money and energy spent on positional consumption bring **an increase of pleasure lasting only as long as the experience of novelty**, i.e. a few days (mobile phones) or a few months (cars and houses).

Thus, we should be aware that the primary purpose of many of the innovations in the fields of new technologies is to increase the dimension of '*comfort*' of these goods and to reduce the dimension of '*creativity*' (albeit present in them). As much as they are funny and very comfortable, too, apps and tablets reduce our commitment to the process that goes from the production to the consumption of goods and services, and they reduce creativity and happiness - we are beginning to see it even in children. Not always, but often. "*I use street guides instead of navigation so I don't lose my skills*", a Roman taxi driver confided to me one day. In other words, **the technological revolution of the last generation is, at least at its current phase, increasing our tendency to be consumers, not producers or workers**. It is quite another issue when new technologies, apps and tablets increase our productive creativity and the use of common property.

This is not to question the importance of these new goods, but only to **apply critical thinking** and take note that the big multinationals do not use technological innovations to increase the creativity and autonomy of citizens, but to create more and more comfort and consumers that quickly replace those **goods - that in turn should be aging even faster**. We must therefore do everything to ensure that the new technological revolution does not keep us 'entertained' and comfortable locked up inside our homes. The quality of democracy depends greatly on our ability not to procure the new technologies only to for-profit capitalism, but to consider them as new rights of citizenship that are accessible to all, especially to the poor, and regulate their use and management as it happens for public goods today. And to increase the dimensions of gifts and gratuitousness that are always present even in these new consumer goods, contrasting the strong tendency to privatize and marketise the new technological goods (free use of wifi networks in our cities, stations and airports is in a worrying decrease).

**History** (from the Roman Empire to the late Renaissance) tells us that societies progress when people direct their competitive nature **into production and labour**; and they start degrading and fall into traps of poverty **when they compete mainly in consumption and for annuities** that make consumption possible without having worked for it. When - yesterday and today - we work better or more to say who we are and to be valued, the social dynamics will deliver prosperity for all. But when we buy a new luxury car or a new tablet to get the appreciation (or envy?) of others, our relationships become sterile, we fall into social dilemmas, get stuck there in the long run, and above all invest our resources in unproductive ways and places. Also because the **positional logic denies** the actual and civil nature of the market which is not a sports race but **mutual benefit (A. Smith), and mutual assistance (A. Genovesi)**.

Finally, in the Latin countries where the archaic '*culture of shame*' and '*make a good impression*' are still very much alive, we fall more easily into these positional traps. In the predominantly Catholic and community based societies people tend to compete by consuming, while in the northern, Protestant and individualistic ones they do it mainly by producing and working. The first to show this was **Amintore Fanfani** (who was a considerable economic historian). The current capitalism has fused, with a stroke of genius (yet to be explored), the 'best' of these two forms of humanism, giving rise to a **culture of individualistic, positional consumption** that is impoverishing and saddening us all. "*Happiness*", whispered my old master **Giacomo Becattini** to me on Christmas Eve, with a wisp of breath, "*is not in the consumption of many goods. Happiness lies in joyfully owning some goods after having joyfully produced them.*"

*Translated by Eszter Kató*