

VALUES IN CONSUMPTION SOCIETY. A COMPARISON OF CONSUMPTION SOCIETY IN POLAND AND IN SLOVAKIA

Joanna Mysona Byrska

PhD Associate Professor, Chair of the Social Philosophy and Policy
Department, The Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow,
Department of Philosophy, Poland

Abstract

The research project, “Values in Consumption Society. A Comparison of Consumption Society in Poland and in Slovakia” aims to present the current perception of values among young Slovaks and Poles, as well as to show recent changes in the understanding of values in Poland and in Slovakia. This project will also attempt to make a diagnosis regarding the spread of consumption attitudes as well as the growing role and meaning of money in the life of young people at the beginning of the 21st century.

Keywords: Consumption, values, society

Introduction

A society of consumption was created during the process of multiple changes to the twentieth century world. Its very rapid development took place in the late twentieth century. Today, the phenomenon of consumerism and consumption society is highly prevalent in all European societies. Also, populations of the Communist Bloc, which for many years remained separate from the world by the Iron Curtain, quickly took over patterns, principles and the rules of the Western European world of consumption. These societies have also evolved into consumption societies.

A group of 72 students from the Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, Slovakia and 56 students from the John Paul II Pontifical University in Krakow took a part in the research. The students from Slovakia were studying ethics and ethical education and the students from Poland, philosophy, social Work, and family studies.

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Please note that even at the preparatory stage of the project, the draft stating the objectives and hypothesis, it became evident that the level of

development in consumption society in Slovakia was different than in Poland. We should then observe how deep the differences are, if there are any similarities and what the reasons could be for the differences that occur in the perception of values. The formulated working hypothesis assumes that Slovak society, due to its geo-political location and for historical reasons, did not undergo the processes of commercialization, marketization, and globalization as strongly as Polish society. In Polish society, the processes of commercialization, marketization, globalization are occurring very quickly and covers many areas of life changing it into a society of consumption. In both societies – Polish and Slovak – similar changes in the perception of values has occurred and currently material values play a more important role. As a result of the research a hierarchy of the values of the younger generation became evident. Also, the similarities and differences between the dominating hierarchies of the values among the representatives of the younger generation of both societies became clear.

Out of the 100 questionnaires distributed to the Polish group over 90 responses were returned, but only 56 were legible and or fully completed. The rest of the questionnaires had to be rejected as incomplete or illegible. At this point the first differences between the Polish and Slovak students can be seen. From the Slovak group 72 legible and completed questionnaires were returned (90 questionnaires were distributed). The education system in Poland allows students to obtain a dyslexic certificate and throughout the period of education these students are not sufficiently motivated to write carefully. By the time they begin university studies their handwriting is already barely legible, which became evident in the questionnaires. At the university level a certificate of dyslexia is no longer accepted, however, students still write illegibly.

Consumer society is changing both the social structure and the worldview of people who have become consumers. The symbol of consumer society is the large shopping center (shopping mall), known as the shopping gallery. George Ritzer calls it "a temple of consumption" in which people indulge in an action that makes them happy and this confirms that they are increasing and acquiring their value as consumers, that means they are buying, buying, and consuming¹⁷. The world of consumption and consumption society is governed by the principle "I consume, therefore I am." As a result of consumption the consumer feels happy, consumption ensures happiness for the individual.¹⁸

¹⁷ G. Ritzer, *Magiczny świat konsumpcji*, Warszawa 2009, passim.

¹⁸ J. Baudrillard, *Spoleczeństwo konsumpcyjne. Jego mity i struktury*, Warszawa 2006, p. 49. According to Baudrillard the happiness is an equivalent of salvation, the consumer satisfies spiritual hunger by buying and by consuming.

The world of consumption has an entire range of rules and principles in force, which differ strongly from the rules specific to older societies. Quantity has become more important than quality and speed is better than accuracy. The satisfaction of, mainly temporary, desires becomes more important, than the implementation of far-sighted plans. What is important is the here and now, the future remains unknown, and attention should be focused on today. Above all, however, a thing that is new dominates as the value of most importance and, unfortunately, it is the hardest to maintain. An item that has just been purchased is already old at the time of payment. The buyer then must immediately begin efforts to exchange it for a new one, which is only better because it is new.

All of these rules and principles governing society and the world of consumption have changed the consumer's hierarchy of the values and this change is far-reaching. "New values" – as Jean Baudrillard calls them are appearing in this reality. In the past these "new values" were not very important or had no weight attached to them¹⁹. According to the rules of the world of consumption the most important values for the consumer are today material values (including money); spiritual values seem to have disappeared or they have lost their primary position. Among the "new values" the most important are entertainment and free time. The work ethic has been replaced by the aesthetic of work and the ethos of free time.

Consumerism also creates new social groups. Sociologists propose to divide consumers into three or even four groups in Poland. The first group is what would be called the "consumer aristocracy", which is only five percent of consumers. This group is the very rich or has a very high-income, they are well-educated and work in management positions or on supervisory boards. The aristocratic consumer buys a product of the highest quality, so expensive, that it is not available for a normal individual (for example a brand-name handbag that costs as much as the annual income of an assistant with a PhD employed at a university in Poland). The second group is the consumer proletariat. This is a large group, which buys consciously. They take a long time to choose, they limited shopping to goods that are necessary, and what is very characteristic is that they do not buy more than they need now. This group mostly consists of young people with a higher education or those who are still studying. They call his attitude "sustainable consumption." They buy in discount stores, they visit relatively inexpensive fast food restaurants, and they do not like to spend time on physical activity. The third group includes consumers susceptible to stimuli, they are also easy

¹⁹ Baudrillard includes in the new values: clean air, clean water, silence, and a nice view outside the window - these are the values that currently received a price. A person that has enough money can afford to buy them; the poor are deprived of them. See.: J. Baudrillard, *Spoleczeństwo konsumpcyjne. Jego mity i struktury*, op. cit., p. 59-61.

to manipulate by means of advertising. These consumers spend a lot of time in shopping malls, they are young and come mainly from small towns, they are work in administration or are skilled trade workers.²⁰ The fourth group is called the "deficient consumer" - this group includes the elderly, the poorly educated and those who are financially not very well off.²¹

Due to age and education, all of the respondents seem to belong to the second group - the consumer proletariat.

The heart of the world of consumption are shopping malls that George Ritzer calls the "temples of world of consumption" because they very often play the role of a substitute for holy places in consumption society.²²

Modern shopping malls are visited by crowds of consumers who can in one convenient location meet all their needs - do shopping, eat Sunday dinner, go to the barber, bring things to the laundry, leave their children at the play area where, for a small fee, professionally trained specialists take care of them. Because of the great role that shopping malls play in the world of consumerism the first question of the questionnaire was concerned with the amount of time spent by students in shopping malls.

40% of the Slovak students stated that they frequented a shopping center once a week, 45% visited a shopping mall because they need to go shopping. Only 9% were at a shopping mall every day, and 4% stated they visit a shopping mall once a month. Only 1.4% acknowledged that they avoid frequenting big shopping malls. 85% of the students polled regularly visit shopping malls.

48% of the Polish students declared frequenting shopping malls for the purpose of shopping, 25% go once a month to a big shopping center, and 14% avoid frequenting shopping malls all together. 13% did not provide answers to the question. In total, 73% regularly visited a shopping mall and are influenced by its reality.²³

The level of development of consumption society in Slovakia is different than in Poland and during the research activity in Slovakia I was able to confirm this. The differences between Poland and Slovakia are quite profound, but I was also able to find some similarities.

²⁰ See: M. Górnik – Durose, B. Mróz, A. M. Zawadzka, *Zakończenie. Współczesna oferta supermarketu szczęścia – nowe zjawiska w zachowaniach konsumenckich. Trójgłos interdyscyplinarny*, w: red. M. Górnik – Durose, A.M. Zawadzka, „W supermarkecie szczęścia. O różnorodności zachowań konsumenckich w kontekście jakości życia”, wyd. Difin, Warszawa 2012, s. 340-341 (s. 321-345) compare: MANIA KUPOWANIA, CZYLI O POSTAWACH KONSUMENCKICH POLAKÓW, CBOS, BS/5/2011, http://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2011/K_005_11.PDF, 08.02.2015.

²¹ See: Z. Bauman, *Płynna nowoczesność*, ed. Literackie, Kraków 2006, passim.

²² See: G. Ritzer, *Magiczny świat konsumpcji*, op. cit., passim.

²³ The get results are consistent with the results of the CBOS from 2011. Big shopping malls displace small shops. See: „Mania kupowania czyli o postawach konsumenckich Polaków, CBOS, BS/5/2011, http://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2011/K_005_11.PDF, 08.02.2015.

The working hypothesis was that Slovak society has not undergone the processes of commercialization, marketization, or globalization as deeply as Polish society, and this was confirmed and verified by the survey. Slovak society has not been as deeply commercialized as Polish society.

The next hypothesis was that in both societies – Polish and Slovak – similar changes in the perception of values has occurred and currently material values play a more important role. But in the Polish society material values seems to be more important than in the Slovak society. This was quite easy to see from the results of my questionnaire.

During the research a hierarchy of the values of the younger generation in Poland and in Slovakia, as well as the similarities and the differences in the dominating hierarchies of the values became clear.

The Slovak students visit shopping malls more often than Polish students. The reason for this difference may be due to the fact that the students live in cities of different sizes. The options they have as to how to spend their free time are also different. Krakow is a cultural city and what it has to offer is much more diverse. The shopping mall in Nitra is one of the few places where students can spend their free time. This is probably the reason why students consider the shopping center as an attractive place.

There is no difference in using the Internet. The Polish and Slovak students spend a lot of time on the Internet (an average of four to five hours per a day). This is a lot of time and it certainly must affect the amount of time spent in personal contact with others. However, the Slovak students spend a lot of time meeting with their friends and family. The Polish students are not as family-oriented.

The differences are obvious to see in the hierarchy of values that students have to choose among. They were given fourteen values and were asked to put them in order of importance to them in value. This is this hierarchy:

	Slovak students	Polish students
1.	Family	Family
2.	Health	Love
3.	Love	Health
4.	Friends	Freedom
5.	Freedom	Friends
6.	Work	Peace in the world
7.	Money	Work
8.	Peace in the world	Good appearance
9.	Comfort	Money
10.	Prosperity	Prosperity
11.	Have fun	Comfort
12.	Healthy eating	Good eating
13.	Good appearance	Healthy eating
14.	Good eating	Have fun

For both Polish and Slovak students, family appears as the number one value. 25% of Polish students seem to understand the family as “Me, my

parents and my partner (wife, husband)” – they do not want to have children. 100% of the Slovak students want to have their own family with no less than two to three children. For both groups love, health, freedom and friends are very important – those values following after family. The next section shows the differences. The importance of money and work is different for the Polish and Slovak students. For the Slovak students money and work are much more important than peace in the world. For the Polish students peace in the world is much more important than money and work. But having a good appearance is important for them than work or money.

In fact neither list of the values presented by the students is typical for the world of consumption. The problem is that both of the lists contain declared values rather than those practiced.

The next hierarchy of the values:

	Slovak students	Polish students
1.	Intelligence	Intelligence
2.	Good manners	Knowledge
3.	Knowledge	Good manners
4.	Sense of humor	Sense of humor
5.	Use of the proper language	Good appearance
6.	Good figure	Good figure
7.	Good appearance	Use of the proper language

Again we can see some differences in importance of values. Intelligence is in first place for both. The second ranking for Slovak students is the good manners (good manners are so important in Slovakia that university students have the option of taking lessons in this matter at the university and they are also an obligatory part of lectures). For Polish students knowledge takes second place. The hierarchy of the values delineated by the Slovak students is not typical for the world of consumption. It may be concluded, that Slovak society is still attached to traditional values.

The hierarchy of values delineated by the Polish students, however, exhibits the typical values for the world of consumption (i. e. a good appearance and figure) and are more important for them than for the Slovak students.

The results of the questionnaire shows that Slovak society is definitely less dominated by the principles and rules of the world of consumption than Polish society. This was the hypothesis and it was repeatedly confirmed by the research. For the Slovak students the most important value is family and to have a family of their own with no less than two children is the dream of all the Slovak students who participated in the research. 25% of the Polish students did not want to have any children and own family. Polish society seems to be becoming a society of singles.

A In terms of religion the results of the questionnaire coincide with the research hypotheses. More than 37% of the Slovak students declared they were not engaged in the life of the church or in the religion. Among the Polish students of the Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow more than 10% were not engaged in religion any way.

Project objective

The aim of this project was to view the issues of the marketization and the commercialization as they present themselves to Slovak and Polish students from a philosophic viewpoint. A possible reason for increasing marketization and the growing role and meaning of money are changes in social attitudes, changes in the perception of value, and the increasing tendency of individuals to isolate themselves from society. The reasons for the expansion of consumerism and consumption society also include many different crises occurring in contemporary reality (crisis of authorities, crisis of conception of the world, secularization).

The life of a contemporary man is concentrated on material goods. The human being is surrounded by a number of goods, which all seem to be within reach if only one has money. Polish society has a strong desire and is willing to work very hard to satisfy their ever-growing material needs. Slovak society (as the results of research show) is less willing to work very hard, often without being able to rest, in order to satisfy their material needs. Slovaks really appreciate time to rest and family time. Poles are willing to sacrifice everything for profit. These survey results paint a sad picture of Polish society as one that is focused on material values and lacks family as an important value.

Specific research project hypothesis

The following specific research project hypothesis was verified:

- Increasing development of capitalism and marketing changes the socio-ethical condition of people and the socio-political reality of their lives.
- A consumption society appears as a result of technological progress, new opportunities and general economic growth, which is related to a change in the conception of the world and life objectives.
- Economic thinking replaces ethical thinking, economy overtakes ethical notions and changes the understanding and hierarchy of the values
- Commercialization also changes roles played by woman and man in the society, roles become blurred, and the family undergoes many changes; these changes are bigger in Poland, and smaller in the Slovak Republic
- Market triumphalism leads to changes in the socio-political structure of the democratic state (economization of politics, culture, education, and religion) – it is quite easy to see in Poland, not in the Slovak Republic; the

Slovak people like to have free time and do not like to work without any breaks (work on the weekend etc.)

- Change of the role of religious cult – this becomes a part of people's tradition, a deep understanding of symbols disappears; this phenomenon is easy to see both in Poland and in the Slovak Republic. The religiosity of the common people is changing and disappearing.
- Changes in understanding of basic social values causes bureaucratic growth and formalization of the areas of life, which up till now have been based on values (such as trust). This is valid for Poland but not for Slovakia, because in Slovakia the family is much stronger than in Poland. To have my own family is one of the most important dreams of the Slovak students, but not for the Polish students.
- Attempts to escape the society of consumption – this is difficult, as it requests a change of the conception of the world and ability to share material goods with others. In the Slovak Republic I have observed how it works in the social protection of the working people. This protection (much stronger than in Poland) may protect the whole society against the development of a consumption society. But it depends on business owners.

Conclusion

The condition of society in Poland is worst than the condition of Slovak society. In Poland consumption is more developed than in Slovakia. The reason for this is that Poland is bigger and economically more viable for foreign business. Also the national character of the people is very important for the development of consumption society. Polish people want to have everything that people in Western Countries have. The Slovak people seem to be calmer and less greedy.

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