

Conference proceedings

**Capitalism, heteronomy and self-determination.
On the need to consider the
existential footprint of capitalist
societies.**

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Abstract

In economics field, current critical research tends to demonstrate the unsustainability of industrial and capitalist economic policies and practices. This is summarized in the notion of ecological footprint. However, this is not the only “negative externalities” of our political and economic system. As far as the individuals are concerned, one might also consider the existential footprint of our current modes of production and consumption.

In our view, sustainability is not the only criteria to take into account if one wants to think about a “fair society”. Therefore, it will be the purpose of this article to provide the reader with a critical look on the existential dimension of our capitalist lifestyle. We will try to put the emphasis on the necessity to combine the imperatives of sustainability with those of emancipation.

Keywords

Post-capitalism, existential footprint, self-determination, heteronomous production, emancipation.

Introduction

Nowadays, it is an obvious fact that academic, political and even business spheres recognize the necessity to engage into a more sustainable paradigm. One can witness the success of the ecological observations concerning the scarcity of natural resources reserves, their unfair and unsustainable consumption.

One can consider that the ideology of progress, growth and expansion, the relationship between materialism and happiness, the irrelevance of wealth indicators, the market pressure to maximize one's capital are the major sources of our current global crisis.

Therefore, sustainable and ecological critique cannot ignore the substantial influence of capitalism on the current situation.

But, since this capitalist lifestyle is unsustainable, are individuals able to live differently? To which extent? Which are the systemic and individual obstacles and pre-requisite to undertake a successful Degrowth transition?

It will be the purpose of this article to demonstrate the necessity to undertake both systemic and individual changes with regard to the imperatives of sustainability and emancipation. In our view, both the ecological and the existential footprint of our capitalist societies should be covered. With that end, we will criticize the capitalist lifestyle with regard to the concept of self-determination .

Our argument will be articulated around three arguments. First, we will question the existence of relationship between the dominant capitalist modes of production (heteronomy) and individual modes of determination (self-/hetero- determination). This section will allow us to observe the major systemic and cultural obstacles to self-determination within a capitalist society. Second, we will consider the individual obstacles that the subject face in his attempt to determine himself and his life course. Finally, we will attempt to draw the fundamental lines for future research for a transition to a sustainable, emancipatory and, therefore, post-capitalist society.

1 External obstacles and resistances:

"If [...] the question of the "good life" is inevitable, believing that one can immediately answer it would be an ideological mistake. Because the social institutions, forms of production and social relationships contain substantial ethical orientations, the practical questions "What do I have to do?" and "How should we live?" cannot be asked as directly (R. Jaeggi, 2005, p. 142).

1.1 Mega-machine, heteronomous production and hetero-determination

In our view, the Mega-technological apparatus (Gorz, 2008, p. 128) reached such a high level of activity and responds to such logics that the heteronomous production becomes an obstacle to the individual self-fulfillment and determination. We find the basis of our argument of this section in André Gorz's Critique de la Raison Economique.

In our industrial society, the heteronomous production pushed the majority of people to specialize themselves in covering professionally one particular aspect of another person's life and gets the majority of the aspects of one's own life professionally covered by another person (p. 252). To him, such a situation leads the individual (1) to be less and less able to respond to the necessities of his own existence and, therefore, (2) to see his life and activities more and more determined by the imperatives of a social apparatus of production and organization. For these reasons, Gorz considers that the "Antique couple" (necessities/freedom) has to be replaced by a more modern one (autonomy/heteronomy) (Gorz, 2008, p. 268).

In an industrial configuration, inter-personal exchanges - through the provision of professional services - will tend to be compulsory since the individuals are (1) wage-dependent and/or not able to produce for themselves the basic foundations of their needs and (2) less and less able to govern their production and,

therefore, their life.

To this, we add the specificity of the capitalist imperatives where the professional services are not only driven by the necessity to interact with each other - since most of the aspects of one's life are professionally taken in charge - but also by the necessity to maximize and increase one's own capital and, therefore, one's offer on the markets.

In this producer-consumer configuration, the individuals do not specialize their offer only for the sake of their customers' satisfaction. Rather, they specialize in order to please the most profitable sources of profit - that is the most profitable demand. These imperatives influence both the production and the consumption spheres.

The homo productivus's offer meets and reinforces the homo consumericus' preferences. The Demand can consume faster, cheaper and with a higher frequency. The objective is, therefore, not to reproduce but to continuously increase one's lifestyle - if not qualitatively, then quantitatively.

With regard to this diagnosis one may wonder if individuals do find any meaning in this specific lifestyle. Can they oppose to it? To which extent are individuals able to determine their life? Linked to these existential questions also lies the possibility to engage a transition toward a more sustainable lifestyle. To us, the questions of the domain of actions, possibilities and preferences and the ability to make substantial choices with regard to one's conception of the "good life"; these questions are difficult to answer in a capitalist society.

In reality, the individual who decides not to comply with the imperatives of market competitiveness, maximization and expansion of his capital - which is the main source of a future re-investment in ever-growing competitive skills and technology - runs the risk to be unable to consume, produce and, therefore, exchange. And this, with regard to both the physical and symbolical dimensions of one's life - marginalization, exclusion, feeling of social guiltiness. As we have mentioned earlier, the instrumental practical questions - which consist in the basic "ways" to sustain and support one's existence in a society - respond to professional standards defined by the capitalist rationality. In this sense, the individual who wants to secure one's own existence is more and more dependent not only of his own production - source of one's income - but also of the production of others.

Therefore, he also will have to consider the imperative of the "qualitatively and/or quantitatively ever-growing competitive production" that will increase and maximize his capital. This "market emphasis" is - not only ecologically but also - existentially detrimental to one's own "evolution". As Gorz put it, the professional knowledge and skills do not provide the individual with marks or criteria that will allow him to find meaning in the world he lives in, to orient himself in it or to re-orient it (Gorz, 2008, p. 149).

Here, one can witness that the human existence tends to decline into a survival economy defined by powerful markets' preferences. Despite the fact that the security of the "instrumental practical questions" is a natural imperative, one can observe that the logics and the rhythms imposed by the Market are such that the instrumental questions tend to be asked at the expense of the existential ones. The means become the end since one is never secured from the danger of being in a position where he cannot exchange anymore and, therefore, earn a sufficient wage to cope with ever-growing levels of highly competitive consumption and production. The access to fundamentals "life supports" - food, accommodation, transport, communication, health care - are constantly weakened by the dynamic and the axioms which support them.

In this sense, one cannot consider the need for a more sustainable model of life and society without considering the logic and dynamics of capitalism and capitalist lifestyles. If one wants to think in terms of sustainability, he will have to ask two questions in parallel: (1) what is the ecological footprint of our capitalist lifestyles on the eco-system? and (2) what is the existential footprint of our capitalist system and consciousness that obstructs the transition to a post-capitalist society and life?

As we have noticed the imperative of (1) an ever-growing, specialized, competitive and profitable production and (2) the maximization of one's own capital are required by the market. This situation weakens the individual's potential for a sustainable and existential transition since he would run the risk of not being able to exchange both physically and symbolically.

In the following section, we also observe that, as a culture, capitalism tend to occult the individual's sensitivity and consciousness with regard to "change".

1.2 Capitalist culture.

To our previous observation, one can also witness the existence of a capitalist cultural framework that (1) influences individual and collective consciousnesses and (2) allows for the legitimacy and reproduction of such a society and lifestyle through time. Here, one might consider the potency of the values among the domain of preferences, actions and possibilities.

In his book *Ethique de l'Existence Post-Capitaste* (Arnsperger, 2009), Christian Arnsperger observes the self-referentiality of this economic system where the human nature that is produced is identical to the what that is needed (p. 91). Within this system - that has created not only its own vision of the world (...) but also of the human nature - a new field of values, criteria, judgements and consciousness has emerged and allowed for a very specific understanding of (1) a successful human life and (2) appropriate collective organization (p. 61). In this sense, capitalism plays a role of radical structuration of the individuals' primary existential truth and becomes not only a system of economic functions but also a system of cultural signification and fundamental existential orientations (p. 81).

In this system, the author observes that the existential experience of the individuals is trivialized to such an extent that it becomes necessary for them to pursue their life trajectory according to the definition of reality given and by the Market. In this framework, individuals accept the pressure to adaptation and flexibility with so much intensity that they are led to forget the idea of a vertical growth - "inner" or philosophico-spiritual dimensions. Instead, they remain into a cycle of horizontal hyper-activity and tend to behave as good "economic agents" (pp. 93-95).

2 Alternatives and subject's pre-requisites :

What is "wrong" in our society affects our ability to act and to understand in such a basic way that we first have to face this falsity before being capable of asking those "practical questions" [...]. This is the reason why before asking the normative question "What shall I do?", it is necessary to understand the conditions of our actions [...]" (Jaeggi, 2005, p. 144)

2.1 Preliminary remarks

The previous section observed the reality of an achieved capitalist society. Fortunately, our societies have not reached such a high degree of development. First, all activities, be them salaried or not, do not all respond to the imperatives of capital-maximization and competitiveness. Second, all individuals do not agree with capitalist lifestyle and rationalities.

2.2 Good life ?

"[B]efore being able to question oneself about the way one has to live, one first has to be in a position to understand the conditions in which one acts [...]. One can correctly ask such a question after one understood the limiting situation in which one used to live in." (Jaeggi, 2005, p. 145)

In our view, it is more fruitful to examine the conditions in which this socratic questioning can emerge rather than answering it. Thus, this section will attempt to (dégager) subjective abilities and resources that are necessary to the emergence of a post-capitalist life. We find the basis of our arguments in A. Gorz and C. Arnsperger's works.

2.3 The primacy of sensitivity as a basis ...

According to Arnsperger (2003, p. 10), the desire not only (1) to rationalize our actions but also the will (2) to bind them with good justifications or reasons finds its source in the floating feeling that something is wrong. Therefore, the desire for individual and social conversion is function of the ethical sensitivity of the individual.

2.4 ... for undertaking the intellectual work.

After this, the individual has to undertake a (1) reflexive and (2) critical work. This work can be understood as the basis for the existential practical questions.

In Arnsperger's terminology, the reflexive work consists in cognitive and argumentative skills. The cognitive skills refer to the ability from the individual to discriminate between what he has the power to influence and what he has no power to change. These skills allow for the delimitation of his sphere of actions. The argumentative skills bear a relation to the intellectual resources - ethical principles - to which the individual refer to in order to justify his actions. These skills allow for the orientation of his sphere of actions.

Finally, Arnsperger considers the necessity to develop a critical consciousness which will provide the individual with sufficient room for considering others' viewpoint and re-examination of one's observations.

2.5 Subjective obstacles

Previously, we have observed major systemic and cultural obstacles to a more sustainable and existential life. In this section, we put the emphasis on these restrictions which affect the individual dimension or his consciousness; namely (1) inability to undertake the political and intellectual work and/or (2) ideological sensitivity and/or (3) the ability to start the psychological-spiritual work.

From our previous observations, one can recall the fact that capitalist producers are caught in an economic survival dynamic benefit from scarce resources - not only in terms of physical and intellectual energy but also in time - to undertake such a work. This point is also valid with regard to the necessity to engage into a political activity.

Despite the fact that individuals' sensitivity to other's viewpoints and - socio-economic - situations might still be existent, one might also take into account the obstacles raised by the colonization of one's own imaginary. Here, we find the argument which justifies the fact that the individuals cannot imagine, conceive or think outside the capitalist axioms. While the individual is still sensitive to issues such as poverty, incomes inequalities, natural resources destruction, etc. he will try to apply capitalist rationality, culture, institutions, rules, etc. to solve other people's issues.

Finally, the individual has to develop the will and the ability to undertake the psychological-spiritual work if he wants to set up the basis and the realization of an alternative lifestyle. In this respect, R. Jaeggi (2009, pp. 101-102) observes that "determining, defining and living one's own life presupposes that one can emotionally and psychologically identify to it. One has to agree with himself and be able to carry out his life project." To face such a situation, one will also need to consider the necessity to undertake "spiritual exercises" (Hadot, 1987) such as detachment, simplicity, austerity, self-limitation.

Here, we refer to the fact that the post-capitalist subject will have to face - more than certainly - unstable and negative relationships with regard to (1) instrumental practical questions (food, accommodation, health care, transport, communication, etc.), (2) inter-personal exchanges: ability to exchange physically and symbolically and, (3) relationship with Institutions and systemic sanctions or indifference due to the capitalist disconnection.

It is not certain that the majority of individuals will be able to consider such a work, especially when the recent economic and political context tends to (1) support individualism - preservation and expansion of one's properties - through a meritocratic ethic of work - which (2) impairs inter-personal exchanges while (3) social security schemes have weakened over the years.

2.6 Major avenues for alternatives: critical communities

If “those who desire more and more power have the resources - in terms of capital - to rope in those who have not enough capital to ensure their independency” (Arnsperger, 2008, p. 97), then “the imperatives [...] consists in re-conquering and extending a sphere in which the auto-regulation of social cooperation and self-determination about one’s life content could prevail.” (Gorz, 2008, p. 162).

In our view, this orientation can be fruitful on the condition that individuals engage into critical and existential communities able to (1) restore a sense of individual’s sovereignty, (2) protect its members from systemic sanctions (Arnsperger, 2009, p. 34) and (3) allow the individual to undertake the intellectual, political and psycho-spiritual works.

At the political and economic levels, we can imagine that these communities would intend to promote alternative axioms such as hospitality, solidarity, charity, ecological sustainability, self-sufficiency or cooperative inter-dependency, self-management and redistribution. On the existential level, one can consider the desire to focus on ontological questions, spirituality, self-knowledge and the sense of unity, fulfilling activities and self-realisation (Arnsperger, 2009, p. 243).

Such communities imply that the individuals can face instrumental practical questions with alternative solutions. This means that further research will have to re-consider the issues posed by (1) production means, (2), wage-dependency, (3) property rights, (4) the power of capitalist States and Markets, and (5) the systemic and cultural work in order to support and legitimate such lifestyles - e. g. education, basic income, redistribution policies, etc.

Conclusions

In the light of our previous arguments, we can conclude that the capitalist lifestyle is not the main result of the individual self-determined choices. On the contrary, this lifestyle tends to respond to powerful supra-individual logics to which the subject, alone, can hardly address. If the individual sees no alternative, he will have to engage into an instrumentalizing horizontal hyper-activity where the others - and the nature - are seen as resources for the maximization of his capital and competitive responsiveness on the markets.

The individual has to focus on the instrumental practical questions - constantly weakened by the capitalist axioms - at the expense of existential ones.

Furthermore, we have also observed that a capitalist existence does not proceed from a neutral - or non-ideological - stance. The question of “good life” is indirectly answered through incentive mechanisms encouraging behaviors that please implicit ethics of labour-individualism, growth and capital maximization.

Capitalism is all the more powerful that individuals are (1) unable to produce the goods that will ensure the satisfaction of fundamental physical - and symbolical - needs and, therefore, (2) wage-dependent. One can see the industrial appropriation of the production means as the original cause of such a situation. In this context, heteronomous production in the specific configuration of capitalism is a major source of hetero-determination. Individual and social consciousness have been affected by cultural and systemic influences. Individual and social potential for change have been weakened by the power of the markets. Therefore, not only the systemic and cultural dimensions have to be considered but also the individual ones.

As a result, the imperatives for a sustainable model of our western societies have to be studied in relationship with critical existential considerations such as critical education, empowering policies, basic income. They should aim at increasing not only individual’s autonomy but also political and spiritual potential.

Definitions:

▸ Heteronomy or heteronomous production: The specialized activities that the individuals have to execute

in order to reach pre-established objectives. These activities are ruled by an external authority or organization and are, therefore, out of the individual's control (Gorz, 2008, p. 131 and p. 402).

▸ Self-determination: Ability to ask and answer to instrumental and existential practical questions within a domain of actions and possibilities (Laugier, 2009, p. 95).

- Instrumental practical questions: questions relatives to the activities that have to be accomplished in order to sustain one's existence.

- Existential practical questions: questions relatives to the purpose, orientations and ends of one's life.

▸ Hetero-determination: situation in which a specific dynamic or fixed states prevent the individual from understanding himself as actor or subject of his own life and actions.

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