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Sociocultural Perspectives on Youth Ethical Consumerism

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Chapter 5

Youth: Between the Price of Consumption and the Value of Commitment

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5.1 An Ethical Approach to Youth Consumerism

The dynamics of the contemporary world can be perceived in the existing diversity of cultural interconnected tendencies, like the current economic and technological movements. These are forces that participate in the development of personal and social projects at the regional, national, or international levels. In this context, we welcome the energizing capacity of youth to change society's social structure by their commitment of solidarity, humanitarian causes, community projects, and socio-environmental movements.

These youth are also involved in the consumption dynamics of society, being both subject and object in it. That is to say that these young people are part of a generation that is not foreign to the logic of the globalized market. In this sense, if they are voracious consumers of everything on the one hand, they are also manipulated by corporatist interests on the other, thus becoming hostages of the consumer machine, mere objects of consumption. This phenomenon is characteristic of our time.

Our reality requires, therefore, more critical and creative thinking to perceive the foundations of this phenomenon and support the search for other forms of experiences that would let young people construct their life based on responsibility and ethics. In addition to values like equality, fraternity, and freedom, other ideals, such as authenticity and solidarity are equally relevant to the renewal of our ethics – after all, we are all citizens of the world (Cortina 2005). Therefore, humankind must

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assume its responsibility in the continuity of the future of the planet. For this reason, the concept of ethics goes beyond individual ethics in order to support an ethics of responsibility (Jonas 2006). To this end, it is necessary to bear in mind, amongst other aspects, that no one can risk anything without taking into account the interests of others, no one is allowed to jeopardize the interests of others, humanity does not have the right to murder other species or promote its own extinction (suicide).

According to Hans Jonas (2006): “from the perspective of responsibility, prudence becomes the core of our moral action” (pp. 87–88). For this reason, the proposition of a more ethical project for the experience of youth should take into account that they have specific characteristics, such as a natural inclination for defiance of the conventional, which is more or less common to all other young people in similar socio-cultural contexts. The present chapter invites the reader to reflect on the mechanisms of the consumerist culture in which youth are its target audience in order to advance ethical propositions for the life of young consumers. Maybe that way we can facilitate the transition from an existence absorbed by the price of consumption to one that is based on the value of the commitment.

5.2 Youth Profile

When dealing with the theme of youth, it is important to emphasize that there is no uniform concept to define this existential and relational experience. According to Candido Alberto Gomes (2011), youth are extremely diverse manifestations that extrapolate any attempt of conceptual framing. Therefore, rather than creating a definition of youth, it is more appropriate to indicate the main potentialities and challenges that characterize it in the contemporary world.

One of the ways in which today’s young people express their vitality is mainly by the care of their body, either by its performance or aesthetic, which explains the flourishing of gyms. Other elements that characterize youth are their ability to create and cultivate connections and be attuned to historical, cultural, and social movements. Yet another feature is their ability to dream utopias, or to anticipate the “never-before-seen viable” (Freire 2008, p. 234). Youth are characterized, therefore, by life projects that are unfinished and that seek some form of complementarity, by participating in non-governmental or social organizations.

Among the various challenges of youth, however, there is the experience of the existential emptiness, which in the understanding of Gilles Lipovetsky and Jean Serroy (2011) increases daily, thus multiplying “intoxicating behaviours to escape the night of a world without value, the abyss of lack of purpose and meaning” (p. 31). For those authors, this tendency of existential emptiness was strengthened mainly by the rejection of higher values such as volunteerism, spirituality, or compassion, as well as by the ease of immediate and instantaneous life projects.

According to Lipovetsky (2005), the tendency of existential emptiness strongly demarcates the current reality, where there is no possibility of change in the future, but only opportunities for realizations in the present moment (hence the willingness of all to preserve youth). The great existential emptiness that is created ends up

being filled by the agility of communication technologies, which floods the young with information. Therefore, there is a controversial relationship between the existential emptiness and the material fulfillment that, in general, materializes virtually through social networks. Although this experience of emptiness is directly linked to the individual, this phenomenon is the result of a social model: “men [sic] can only exist in society and for society” (Castoriadis 2006, p. 63). In any case, society is dominated by the preponderance of the capitalist imaginary, either by the primacy of the economic dimension, the preference of a productive rationality, or the privilege of mechanisms that seek to promote consumption. It is the logic of the market economy that excludes those who do not fold to the prevailing convention of capital (Castoriadis 2006).

If, on the one hand, this model brings some material benefits to some (richer) groups, on the other hand, it proves to be a prototype for the destruction of the cultural existence and social experience of the young. In that regard, Cornelius Castoriadis (2009) suggests the development of the imaginary dimension, which would be “the capacity to form a world and to give sense, meaning to it and to oneself, to what we do” (p. 51). Despite the contradictions of daily life, especially during youth years, we must counteract all movements that promote the loss of the meaning of our stories. In addition, we must consider the role of technologies, which according to Zigmunt Bauman (1997) are a contribution to humanity, but which require an ever-greater fragmentation of the human being in the postmodern world. Consequently, according to Jonas (2006), ethics tends to be diluted among contemporary technological procedures: “the delimitations of proximity and simultaneity disappear, broken by spatial growth and the temporal extension of the consequences of cause and effect, and set in motion by technical praxis even when undertaken for close purposes” (p. 40).

For that reason, the great challenge experienced by young people is the perception that they are the important agents of consumption, while at the same time the main victims of this economic-social dynamic. In other words, “we are pressured to consume more, and in this way we ourselves become products in the consumer and labour markets” (Bauman 2011, p. 65). This scenario reveals a contradiction: people are both voracious consumers and fragile patients who can be consumed at all times and in all forms by the current consumer market.

Such a view goes beyond interpersonal relationships and finds support in a system that expresses value judgment – bourgeois economic theory – without being challenged. This fact is perceived by Franz Hinkelammert (2014), who affirms that “bourgeois economic theory does not take into account needs, it takes into account preferences; thus, the integral perspective of reality has disintegrated” (p. 115). Considering, therefore, that all human needs were not taken into account, but only the individual or group preferences, a civilization fractionation process was triggered, mainly between cultures and economic groups.

The potentialities and challenges presented here are but a summary of the multiplicity of manifestations that characterize contemporary youth. However, it is noted that issues related to the richness and impoverishment of the dynamics of the contemporary world of youth are inexorably linked to consumerism.

5.3 Consumer Price

The potentialities and challenges of the youth, according to previous reflection, mark the great imbalances inherent to their experience. For example, the growing race and gender intolerance, structural and conjunctural unemployment, access and permanence in school, the neglect of public policies, and disenchantment with life and history. Therefore, the energy that gives a certain identity to young people is losing its strength in the face of the violent interruption of lives and/or the atrophy of social relations caused by individualism.

The multiplicity of connections that youth establish on a daily basis also reveals how media technologies are becoming the theoretical and practical reference of youth behaviour. Such a framework motivates youth to participate in occasional relationships, thus forging a growing chain of contacts, contributing to the superficiality of family, religious, professional or affective relationships. In addition, they are not committed to building a project of life that has meaning for their human existence.

The energy that fuels youth to desire and dream loses its power insofar as it is numbed by suicidal trips promoted by drugs and vices as well as frustrated affective relationships. In this way, the energies that should propel human achievement are interrupted by immediate satisfaction or by the unbridled pursuit of occasional experiences.

Lipovetsky and Serroy (2011) has described our world as hypermodern and characterized by four structuring poles: hypercapitalism (considered the great force of financial globalization), hypertechnization (understood by the influence of diversity and universality of technologies), hyperindividualism (characterized by the supremacy of the ego), and hyperconsumption (understood as the exponential energy of mercantile hedonism). According to the authors, these features provide support to the strengthening of a disoriented society.

The dynamics of this context could also be the categories of deregulation, privatization, and individualization, aspects considered by Bauman (2011) as the basis for personal fulfillment, made to the extent of consumer happiness and, therefore, “turned, like all joys of consumption, to individual, solitary pleasures, even when appreciated together” (p. 34). Thus, consumption became, within the context of a liquid and disposable society, the destabilizing energy of values of solidarity and responsibility, once again strengthening a selfish and individualistic life style.

To make this desire burn, it is indispensable to have certain resources, especially economic resources. This provision is being met, mainly, by the economic globalization that emerged in the last century (Badiou 2007). In this context, profit was the central element and this dynamic continues to reflect on the current reality, which is understood by Ulrich Beck (2011) through the articulation between the social production of wealth and the social production of risks. According to the author, “problems and conflicts arising from the production, definition and distribution of scientifically-technologically produced risks are added to distribution and conflict problems of the society of scarcity” (p. 23). Thus, the characteristic for the production of wealth is strongly linked to economic, social, and technological risks. As inheritors

of this model, we are marked by the collapse of values and traditional institutions as well as by social barbarism. While current society has no more humanitarian projects, the pursuit of profit at any price prevails to meet the preference and anxiety for consumption. Faced with this mercantile hedonism, it is opportune to recommend some changes in this logic and to seek ways to reconstruct human dignity.

Therefore, with the desire to promote change, Bauman (2011) proposes to “confront difficult challenges like goals well beyond our reach and standards of excellence that seem far from our ability to achieve them” (p. 24). It is necessary to point to horizons of meaning, to create meaningful projects, and to reaffirm the value of ethics in a world of consumers. And this task is not a luxury reserved for some but for all because, according to Leonardo Boff (2012), “the current crisis, with the severe threats that globally weigh on everyone, poses as urgent the matter of the collective responsibility of human beings” (p. 21). In order to respond to this call, we next look to the value of the commitment based on the principle of ethics.

5.4 The Value of Commitment

After reflecting on some features of the youth’s physiognomy and indicating some challenges of young people in the contemporary world, here we suggest that ethics is necessary to create and cultivate the value of commitment. In this sense, according to Yves La Taille (2006), “to speak of morals is to speak of duties, and to speak of ethics is to speak of the search of a ‘good life’ or, if you like, a life worth living” (p. 30). The purpose of this proposal is to enable young people to experience authenticity, or the desire to experience a process of social transformation and cultural development. In the core of this proposition there is the recommendation for one to be aware that the simultaneous communication of all the events on the planet pose for men the challenge of assuming the responsibility of their actions before all. In any case, it is urgent to propose an ethics of joint liability, capable of addressing emerging challenges, such as the environment, the economy and cultural diversity, and to ensure that men have the ability to govern the powers they actually possess.

Given these circumstances, which are unfavourable to proposing values, especially for youth, it becomes an even greater challenge to suggest ethics as a necessary and recommended value for living life with dignity. On the basis of this provision, it is advisable to return to a proposal by Anthony Giddens (1996): “far from seeing the disappearance of universal values, perhaps this is the first time in the history of mankind that these values present a true point of support” (p. 286). These points of support can be found in the concept of authenticity proposed by Charles Taylor (2009), in the notion of reconnection suggested by of Edgard Morin (2005), and in the idea of sociability as defended by Manfredo de Oliveira (1993).

Taylor (2009) talks about the relationship between identity and diversity or between the singularity and the community, which seeks an integral formation of the being through knowing how to be more authentic through individuality, solidarity, and freedom. This proposition presupposes an analysis of modernity, contextu-

alized from the seventeenth century, a period considered as the beginning of a moral decay that resulted in three maladies: primacy of instrumental reason, loss of senses and values, and fragilization of political freedom. These deficiencies reveal a model of individualism marked by the self-centered dimension expressed in the mythological figure of Narcissus, by the technicality that seeks to use technology as a means to achieve all ends as well as by disinterest in the common cause or the renunciation of socio-political commitment. These realities form a vicious circle manifested by atomism, instrumentalism, and conformity. In order to overcome this situation, it is recommended to strengthen a virtuous process through the ethics of authenticity inspired by self-determination and reflective consciousness.

According to Taylor (2009): “Authenticity implies creation and construction, originality and creativity as well as criticality and opposition to established social rules, but also requires openness to horizons of meaning and a definition of self made through dialogue” (p. 75). The relationship between meaning and significance, dialogue and dialogic, and the individual and social could enhance an ethics of authenticity. Such a suggestion seems to be well directed to the youth because “authenticity implies originality, demands revolt against convention” (Taylor 2009, p. 74). These dispositions of originality and diversity, or being-in-itself and being-to-the-other constitute values that express young people’s commitment to personal life and social life.

Morin (2005), who articulates the subjective and objective, the poetry and wisdom, the community and civic amongst the instances of the triad individual-society-species. The author’s understanding of the world is bound, on the one hand, to the fragmentation of the human being, of the social systems, and the formation of the species, and on the other a requirement of the regeneration of these dynamics in the context of a complex reality. He asserts that human beings consider themselves to be the creator of the sciences, but are creatures of inventions instead, subject to techniques. That is, they have been transformed into the object of their technologies. Humanity is, according to the same author, hostage to an amoral science and immoral politics, leading humanity to a planetary tragedy. This reality is part of the human condition, manifested by egocentrism and altruism, by separation and reconnection. Still according to Morin (2005), altruistic ethics “is an ethic of reconnection that requires maintaining openness to the other, safeguarding the common sense of identity, consolidating, and toning the understanding of the other” (p. 103). Therefore, despite the current civilization’s strengthening of the dynamics of separation, it is desirable to propose the ethics of religation, which would be an imperative to experience integration with the other, with nature, and with the transcendent.

For Marco Zingano (2013) there must be a decentering of the self: “agents take into consideration the interests of others as such, so that ‘you’ and ‘him’ are incorporated into the moral scene once occupied entirely by ‘I’” (pp. 15–16). Altruism is revealing of a moral act because it manages to recognize people as constituted subjects with the same human dignity. Before this scenario, a “reconnection with the other, reconnection with a community, reconnection with a society and, in the limit, reconnection with the human species” (Morin 2005, p. 21). This procedure is

strengthened when society starts to demand that individuals adopt an ethics of solidarity and responsibility as a possibility to experience the value of commitment.

From a religious ethical standpoint, all beings, all systems, and all processes are involved, agreeing with Morin (2005) that “ethics are religions and religions are ethical” (p. 39). This claim could lead young people to strive to confirm the innumerable connections they establish daily, but to affirm new links with people, natural phenomena, and the planet as a whole.

The value of compromise, finally, considers the ethics of sociability. It articulates thinking and doing good and to establish this relationship between reflecting and acting, there is love. In order to inaugurate this ethical possibility, young people have to choose to return to wisdom and poetry in connection with themselves, with others, and with nature, avoiding possessive love and promoting the love of hospitality, forgiveness, recognition, passion, and care. Leonardo Boff (2012) states: “care makes us truly ethical beings who take responsibility for human and environmental well-being, solidarity” (p. 264). This ethics of sociability requires the existence of a being who cooperates with a transformative praxis, inserted in a process of nonconformity with the current socio-environmental problems.

For this reason, since the original experience of the Greeks, sociability is seen “as something constitutive of human essence, so that man, as essentially political, only in the ‘political community’ (polis) can find its self-actualization” (Oliveira 1993, p. 21). This proposition leads one to consider any human being as more than a being of necessity, but a being of community, and a being of sociability.

Thus, sociability-oriented ethics would be a procedure that seeks to satisfy human needs through the enjoyment of goods, a transparent process that would contribute to the construction of a good and just life. Therefore, the value of the commitment, based on the proposal of an ethics of authenticity, reconnection and sociability, could contribute to an innovative project for youth. This proposal breaks with an alienating dynamic of the consumerist movement that homogenizes and instead promotes the development of conscious subjects capable of building their own history and that of humanity based on principles of solidarity, responsibility, and justice.

5.5 The Field of Possibilities of the Application of Ethical Principles

Even with the suggested ethical guidelines, some questions remain open. How can techno-scientific achievements account for what mankind should adopt as an ethical procedure (Nodari 2010)? How can certain social, economic, political, religious, and cultural conditions contribute to youth participation in a movement geared to happiness? In face of the diverse forms to cultivate life, would an ethical commitment that contemplates respect for the other be possible? Given the diversity of connectivities experienced by youth, what ethical commitments could be cultivated to nourish friendships that would contribute to personal, professional, and spiritual

growth? To trigger a process of cultural change in relation to utopias would be suggestive of participation in social projects, community actions, and political programs. However, how to motivate young people to initiate social transformation?

To answer some of these questions, one would have to link science to consciousness and technique to ethics. Or to link singularity to coexistence, information to understanding, and well-being to good life (Siveres 2013). It is important that young people be able to guide themselves according to ethical principles in order to contribute to the development of projects of life that favour more solidary relations and that strengthen the possibilities of a life worthy living for all. This was precisely the purpose of this reflection: to indicate the value of religion ethics and ethics of sociability as possible ways for a healthier world, both of which are based on the authenticity of people and their potential for social transformation.

In the possibility of experiencing the principles presented here, it would be possible to move away from a tendency to value the price of consumption, towards prizing the value of commitment. Then, youth could be the protagonist of a humanitarian project that shed light on all the relations and correlations of the path of humanity in its historical pilgrimage on this planet.

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