

## CONTEMPORARY FACES OF CAPITALISM: FROM HOMO OECONOMICUS TO HOMO ECOLOGICUS

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**Abstract:** Modern man is trapped between two contradictory attitudes, duties: to be economically efficient and ecologically responsible. Shifting the burden towards ecological responsibility creates a new ethical order, but does not invalidate the economic order. As a result, isn't the new ethical entity homo ecologicus becoming even more homo oeconomicus? In this paper, I ask the question whether the contemporary attitudes of modern citizens segregating garbage are an expression of their ecological awareness or rather the result of the policies of big corporations, which have been for several years shifting the responsibility for littering the planet from a producer to an individual consumer.

**Keywords:** ecology, capitalism, plastics, recykling, one-off civilisation, environmental awareness.

### Introduction

Our daily life is filled with capitalism<sup>1</sup>. We live in a world in which almost every thing, every attitude can be a well prepared product, a trap for our attention (Napiórkowski, 2019; Chibner, 2019). Whether I am one way or another is not a moral manifestation, but an economic process. Moreover, we are in a constant sense of being in a crisis - it is a permanent element of the life of contemporary man (Koselleck, 1990). The source of this feeling is capitalism, which for the last three centuries, being our everyday narrative, functions only because it exploits nature for free or for half a free. Not only does it exploit it, using natural resources to produce goods, but it also treats nature as a "global waste dump". The ecological crisis shows that nature is unable to perform two roles in the service of capitalism: that of a source and a landfill (Keucheyan, 2017). Contemporary man is therefore trapped between two conflicting attitudes

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<sup>1</sup> The author does not mean here any specific model of capitalism, which, as we know, has different faces – it is a continental, Anglo-Saxon or Asian model (Amable, 2004). For the purposes of the article, let us assume, after Belle, that capitalism is a socioeconomic system aimed at the production of goods by means of rational cost and price calculations and the accumulation of capital for reinvestment (Bell, 1994).

and duties. On the one hand, he should be economically efficient and, on the other, environmentally responsible. In the article I ask the question whether the contemporary attitudes of modern citizens segregating waste are an expression of their environmental awareness or rather the result of the policy of corporations, which for decades have been transferring responsibility for littering the planet from the producer to the consumer.

Man appeared on Earth relatively recently, and only "yesterday" he began to use non-renewable natural resources as a source of energy. Coal, crude oil and atom are used by local economies to varying degrees depending on their development and the state of natural resources. In addition, oil is now the backbone of world industry. At the same time, man began to change the ordered matter into a molecular waste bin at a much faster rate than the remaining green organisms on earth are able to process. As a result, the domination of humans over ecological space reached such a level that the evolutionary process on Earth started to reverse (Robert, 1992). The majority of man-made waste contains largely toxic metals and artificial chemical compounds, for which green organisms are powerless. What is regarded as technological progress and achievements is de facto biological ignorance and a march back to the times when there was no life on Earth (Korten, 2002).

## **Plastic Civilization**

A perfect material illustrating the dilemma of "economic or ecological" of contemporary man is plastic, called at the beginning of its existence "new matter". In his famous essay "Plastic" Roland Barthes wrote that it was "magic matter" and that because of it the previous "hierarchy of substances was cancelled; one replaces all the others". (Barthes, 2000). Plastic is a figure of one-offs that is a symptom of an era of consumerism and human attitudes<sup>2</sup>. Above all, plastic is "new magical matter", which is simply everywhere: in microscopic amounts in tea as a binder of most of the billions of bags drunk in the world, it is in clothes, almost fifty percent of planes and cars are made of it. Every year the world produces about 340 million tons of plastic, which is enough to fill all New York skyscrapers. For decades, man has been producing immeasurable amounts of plastic, but for some reason only recently has he really started to worry about it (Buranyi, 2019). Is it because people's environmental awareness has increased, or is it because humanity has started to directly feel the danger of plastic? A good example of the reason why people have turned their attention to this growing problem is plastic particles called micro-plastics<sup>3</sup>. These particles, invisible to the naked eye, which are washed

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<sup>2</sup> The author of this article is closer to the term "the era of unreflective consumerism". (Rąb, K., and Rąb, Ł., 2015)

<sup>3</sup> Micro-plastics are small pieces of plastic with a length of less than five millimetres. Micro-plastic is a result of degradation processes, especially disintegrations occurring in nature due to various physical, chemical and biological factors (Whitacre 2014; Nowak, and Cybulska, 2018).

out of our clothes during washing, land in the oceans, then in fish, and then come back to us in food. There's also a shorter route. Nowadays, a lot of sewage treatment plants does not stop many small contaminants, so plastic comes back to us earlier. There is also a micro-plastic that reaches us by inhalation. According to the author of the article "Human Consumption of Microplastics", the average American eats 74,000 to 121,000 microplastic particles a year. Additionally, people who drink water only from plastic bottles may take another 90 000 particles compared to 4000 drunk by the consumers of "tap water". (Cox et al., 2019). These figures sound serious and, while it is obvious that the contamination of the environment with micro-plastics is enormous, the answer to the question "what impact it may have on human health" is still unknown (Wright, and Kelly, 2017; Editorial, 2017).

Another example that drew people's attention to the "plastic" problem, and which is less abstract for ordinary people than the problem of climate change, for example, are the ordinary plastic rubbish that<sup>4</sup> surrounds us. However, to get rid of plastic, it is not enough not to use plastic pipes in pubs or to withdraw from disposable packaging<sup>5</sup>. Plastics is everywhere not because it is better than the natural materials it replaces. Plastics are omnipresent because it is lighter and cheaper, and that's because it's easy to justify throwing it away. The main beneficiaries – the whole plastics industry – played and continue to play a huge role in this 'justification'. The history of plastics is inseparable from the history of the fossil fuel industry and the "one-off civilization" fuelled by the culture of consumption that followed the Second World War (Buranyi, 2019). But even before the plastic era, corporations were preparing consumers for the "one-off" era. Until around the 1930s, the system of reuse of product containers dominated, especially in the United States of America<sup>6</sup>. The change occurred when the metal can was invented. The transition from reusable to disposable packaging has opened up great prospects<sup>7</sup> – eliminating bottle collection and re-filling costs, eliminating intermediaries, local bottlers, concentrating production while expanding distribution (Chamayou, 2019).

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<sup>4</sup> Mountains of plastic rubbish, which grow with technological progress, also have a significant impact on climate change. The production and disposal of plastics has an impact on the carbon footprint. However, according to some environmentalists, the abandonment of plastic straws and disposables will not make much difference. They are convinced, however, that the best chance of reducing the carbon footprint is, for example, four days' working time and adequate management of leisure time. According to a report by researchers from the Political Economy Research Institute at the University of Massachusetts, a 10% reduction in working time will reduce the carbon footprint by 14.6%. (fpiec.pl, 2019).

<sup>5</sup> Both of these attitudes are now very popular and are often more fashionable than environmentally conscious. However, regardless of the source of this behaviour, the effect is the same.

<sup>6</sup> Don't confuse it with recycling.

<sup>7</sup> The great prospects, of course, only apply to packaging manufacturers.

## One-off Civilization

Advertising industry played a big "educational" role in the creation of a "one-time civilisation". In the first (still from the 1930s) press advertising messages, the main advantage of the new packaging was its one-off nature. The keyword was the slogan "Used once, thrown away!" With such campaigns and the lifestyle promoted by them, it soon turned out that our environment is turning into a rubbish dump. This started to disturb people who had to live in a heap of rubbish and the authorities on whom the burden of (mainly financial) cleaning fell. The producers of the packaging industry faced a problem that they managed to solve cleverly. In 1953, companies such as Coca-Cola, Pepsi, Dow Chemical and Mobil founded "Keep America Beautiful"<sup>8</sup>. Its task was, first of all, to create a new ecological awareness among Americans. Thanks to hundreds of advertising publications in the spirit of "Pollution starts with people". People can stop them" (Buranyi, 2019), "KAB" has convinced consumers that waste is a "matter of individual responsibility, independent of the production process". (Hazen, 2005). So in one sentence: garbage is our individual fault. The second issue addressed by the "KAB" campaigns was the promotion of a relatively new idea: home recycling. Packaging and beverage manufacturers quickly began to instil in consumers the idea that recycling would prevent their products from ending up in landfill (Chamayou, 2019). Of course this is not true, because it is not possible to recycle a plastic bottle to produce a second one (Buranyi, 2019). In the end, it always ends up in garbage or the ocean<sup>9</sup>. In addition, recycling of plastics is not profitable and, as a result, recycling is largely financed by the state<sup>10</sup>. When we buy plastic, we actually buy garbage and pay for it 3 times: in the shop, in rent (garbage collection) and in taxes.

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<sup>8</sup> Hereinafter referred to as "KAB".

<sup>9</sup> Different estimates suggest that only 5-10% of the world's plastics are recyclable. More than 30% of them go to landfill and about a third to oceans (Bagiński, 2019). Glass, steel and aluminium can be reworked almost infinitely many times. The recycling rate of aluminium cans reaches over 80%. The first bauxite, the main source of aluminium, was mined around 1900, and 75% of the aluminium produced since then is still in circulation (Łazarczyk, 2019).

<sup>10</sup> It's different in every country. For example, in Poland, packaging management is mainly financed by municipalities (Teraz Środowisko, 2017).

## Is it possible to convert from homo oeconomicus to homo ecologicus?

In order to answer the question of whether ecological man can be liberated from economic mankind, three additional questions need to be resolved. First of all, are we able to abandon consumerism and engage in the philosophy of self-restraint<sup>11</sup>? Although, according to some philosophers of technology, the expansive development of technology, which is the driving force behind consumptionism, causes the disappearance of spontaneous and emotional actions (Kuzior, 2006), the author of this article believes that abandoning consumptionism is possible if certain conditions are met. Above all, there must (and does) be a shift of the burden towards environmental responsibility, which will create (and produce) a new ethical order. The problem is that the new order does not invalidate the economic order at the same time (Chamayou, 2019), and this is a *sine qua non* condition for the full formation of the "homo ecologicus". As long as the ecological man speaks an economic language, he will be immersed in it, he will not think in an ecological way. This brings us to the second question of whether producers (capital) will allow for evolution towards "homo ecologicus". One of the characteristics of capitalism is that it destroys all non-market entities and structures that used to limit it (Robinson, 2019). The private sphere is increasingly saturated with capitalism. Our choices, which seem autonomous to us, such as not using plastic disposables, are in fact a top-down (capital) structure<sup>12</sup> designed by manufacturers. This seems like a reversal of Mises' classic definition of capitalism, according to which capitalism is a consumer democracy, where everyone chooses the best or most necessary product for them, as opposed to socialism, in which the state chooses as a consumer (Mises, 2007).

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<sup>11</sup> Self-restraint is a manifestation of deep awareness of the destructive potential of man (Kulik, 2017). The philosophy of self-limitation is a new ethical "proposition". In Poland propagated by the renowned writer Olga Tokarczuk. In her opinion, the common denominator connecting individuals and enabling their self-organisation will be a common ethical sensitivity consisting in self-limitation, respect for the environment and undeniable consensus that the Earth belongs to all beings. The philosophy of self-restraint is part of Olga Tokarczuk's plan to repair the world, she presented during the Forum of the Future of Culture in 2019. A plan consisting of eight pillars is a typical proposal of utopia, which the author is aware of. The philosophy of self-limitation has great civilization implications because it negates the foundations of modern civilization - "still further, more, stronger, more intense". If all people "caused by guilt and sudden internal change (...) suddenly started to say "no, no, no, no" to their excessive needs and desires, this civilization would collapse. But it will also die if they don't learn to do so to some extent. We need a new equilibrium." (King 2019; Bendyk 2018).

<sup>12</sup> A frequent situation in the history of capitalism is the moment when the market reaches for something that exists outside the sphere of the market and gives it a new life as a product. For example, water or sporting events that have been commercialised almost entirely. In this case the product is the so-called "behavioural surplus" – information generated by people during their daily use of the Internet and smart technologies. This data is the basis for the capitalism of supervision. This is a large-scale process of collecting, analysing and processing data for profit. This is particularly true for very large data sets (big data). These data describe the lives of millions or even billions of people, allowing for their identification, creation of correlations and patterns of behavior, and in consequence their prediction or planning (Zuboff, 2019).

In the world of non-reflective consumerism, we are surrounded by a growing number of things that are essentially one-off, and which in some sense define us as human beings. Can this "one-off" thing affect people's perception of themselves as "one-off"? Although the broader answers to these questions go beyond the formula of this article, they have to be asked because the question of whether we are a one-off civilization that is not interested in the future is very important in the context of creating a new ethical order, a new contract. Every society is a kind of contract in which everyone can pursue their own interests if they allow others to do the same. This new agreement, which aims to transform the economic man into an ecological man, concerns not only those who live here and now, but also, if not above all, future generations. Failure to deal with the fate of the land in 50, 100 or 200 years makes it impossible to conclude such a new social contract (Gray, 2010).

## Ending

Certainly the actual choices of citizens, those who have an ecological attitude, for example by segregating waste and those who refuse to do so, are an expression of their split between the desire to be economically efficient and, at the same time, environmentally responsible. Our ecological awareness, which for us is an existential issue, for producers is a form of new needs, this time ecological. Being unable to break free from the ties of economic language and from a life saturated with capitalism, living in a culture that says "yes" to every need, the new ethical subject "homo ecologicus" becomes even more homo oeconomicus.

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