



EXPLOITATION IN THE NAME OF PROGRESS: A PHILOSOPHICAL CRITIQUE OF INDUSTRIALIZATION AND CONSUMERISM

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract

This paper examines the interconnected forces of industrialization and consumerism, exploring how their evolution has shaped modern society. It begins by defining industrialization and outlining its transformative impact on economic structures, technological development, and patterns of human labour. The study then investigates the rise of consumerism, analysing the social, economic, and psychological factors that drive increasing consumption and its effects on individuals and communities. By presenting industrialization and consumerism through a cause-and-effect lens, the paper highlights how mass production fuelled mass consumption, creating cycles of demand that continue to influence global markets and cultural values. Finally, it addresses the darker side of progress, illustrating how unchecked industrial and consumer growth contribute to environmental degradation, resource depletion, and social imbalance. The findings emphasize the need to critically reassess contemporary notions of progress to ensure a more sustainable and equitable future.

Keywords: *Industrialization, Consumerism, Mass Production, Environmental Impact, Sustainability*

Introduction

Industrialization and consumerism stand as two defining forces that have shaped the modern world. From the rise of factories and mass production to the ever-increasing demand for goods, these forces have not only transformed economies but also influenced cultures, values, and the environment. As societies embraced industrial progress, a parallel growth in consumer culture emerged fuelling economic expansion while simultaneously raising questions about sustainability, ethics, and long-term consequences. Understanding the relationship between industrialization and consumerism is therefore essential for grasping how contemporary lifestyles and global challenges have developed over time. This paper explores the historical meaning of industrialization, the roots and impacts of consumerism, and the intricate cause-and-effect relationship between the two. Ultimately, it examines the paradox of progress how advancements intended to improve human life can, when unchecked, lead to environmental degradation, social inequalities, and forms of destruction that threaten the very foundations of modern society.

The Meaning and Understanding of Industrialization

Industrialization is the shift from an agrarian, manual-labour economy to one driven by mechanized manufacturing and advanced technology. It grew out of major technological innovations such as the steam engine, spinning jenny, power loom, and Bessemer steel process which increased production efficiency and enabled large-scale industry. Abundant resources like coal and iron, along with growing capital from trade and banking, supported rapid industrial growth. Rising populations provided both a cheap labour force and greater consumer demand, while urban migration transformed social and economic life. Together, these developments reshaped traditional societies and laid the foundation for modern industrial economies. For decades, human civilization has been threatened by the spread of fear and violence, leading to the breakdown of social harmony. Such a crisis cannot be taken for granted, as ignoring it risks endangering our very existence. The French philosopher Paul Ricoeur refers to this condition as a “single world civilization.” According to Ricoeur, “Civilization is the very relationship of human beings to each other; this relationship is represented in the idea of humanity. This civilizational configuration communicates the connectedness of human subjects under the idea of humanity. Therefore, it is the necessary moment of recognition of cultural alterity and cultural uniqueness, which is totally undermined by a globally one-dimensional civilization.”¹

Industrialization has been a major cause of modern environmental degradation by increasing pollution, depleting natural resources, and destroying habitats. The rise of factories and mass production has led to the release of harmful pollutants into the air, water, and soil, contributing to issues like air pollution, water contamination, and climate change. Industrial activities often require excessive extraction of fossil fuels, minerals, and forests, causing deforestation, loss of biodiversity, and resource

depletion. Additionally, industrial waste and chemical byproducts pollute ecosystems, while expanding urban and industrial areas result in habitat loss. Overall, industrialization's heavy reliance on non-renewable resources and pollutive processes has significantly harmed the environment and accelerated global environmental problems. One of the pioneers of ecological sustainability, named Hemarn Daly (1990) define that "Environmental sustainability is the rates of renewable resource harvest, pollution creation, and non-renewable resource depletion that can be continued indefinitely". The true practice of environmental sustainability is to ensure that the needs of present generation are met without limiting the ability of future generations to meet their needs. (Daly 1990). Daly describe the environmental sustainability into different sectors; natural resources is one very important among them. Natural resources are components which is limited in amount and that exist in the world without the human input. This means all the most of the natural resources will eventually run out after a period of time. Natural resources are not only essential to the survival of humans but for all other living organisms as well. All the products in the world use natural resources as their basic component, which may be water, air, natural chemicals or energy. Industrialize is completely based upon the extra consumption of all natural resources, which put the nature under pressure.ⁱⁱ It is undoubtedly true that we do things much more efficiently than before, but we do not realize that along with the cost of money, time and labour, these new technologies include costs of us our well-being as well as earth. This is also a fact that shortest of water, air, and hazardous waste pressing environmental problem are caused by the industrialization. Industrial emissions combine with vehicle exhausts caused extensive air pollution, while concentrations of heavy metals and ammonia loads are often high enough to cause major threat to life down-river from industrial areas. But the general public are not that much aware about the crisis caused by industrialization. Even the government are not taking the accurate initiative to deal with this environmental degradation. Here are few things which could be the efficient things towards the problem of the environment and sustainable future. Socio-economic development of the country must be very eco-friendly to environment. In this regard, it is imperative that "each economic project (industries, firms or any business plan) must have a plan to take care of environmental treatment for damages they may cause; each business in operation must have a plan and follow up procedure for waste and sewage treatment. To encourage scientific research on environmental protection and to enhance socialization of environmental protection tasks including solutions to environmental protection that can be implemented by the people and social organizations. There must be general plans on environmental protection in all the economic zones throughout the country. Through those plans, the economic value of the environment should be calculated so that economic and technological projects can be the basis for economic measures towards environmental protection."ⁱⁱⁱ

Exploring Consumerism; Causes and Impact

Consumerism is a social and economic ideology that encourages the acquisition and consumption of goods and services in increasing amounts. It is both a cultural mindset and an economic driver, where the buying of material possessions is viewed as essential for personal happiness, social status, and economic success. Consumerism is a kind of specific model that promote the acquisition and purchase of goods and services in order to enhance personal satisfaction and economic stimulation. Consumerism makes the man buying of goods and services even when it is not that much needed for them. But this ideology may help to improve GDP growth of country sustainability, but at the same time it compromises the availability of natural resources for future generations to meet their own needs. Consumerism is considered as the fuel of modern economics and it is a socio-economic phenomenon. It is very important for economic growth but it has a huge negative impact on the environment which affects sustainability. Due to consumerist mentality, peoples led to the massive exploitation of goods and services, which affects sustainability. With rising consumerism, companies and brands are compelled to produce more goods to meet growing demands. This leads to increased pollution and greater strain on energy resources, thereby negatively impacting sustainability.^{iv} Consumerism exerts a deeply damaging impact on the environment, primarily by driving excessive demand for goods. As people purchase more, industries increase production, leading to the rapid depletion of natural resources. This heightened demand requires greater energy use, more raw materials, and generates significant amounts of waste and pollution. The core problem lies not only in the methods of production but in the sheer volume of consumption itself. Goods and services continue to be produced because consumers create a market for them, making unsustainable demand a central environmental concern. Efficient and responsible use of natural resources is therefore essential to prevent exhaustion and minimize ecological damage. However, global consumption patterns remain highly uneven while certain regions overconsume to the point of wastefulness, many others struggle to meet basic needs. This imbalance intensifies environmental degradation, as the overconsuming populations place disproportionate pressure on the planet. Such disparities highlight the urgent need to rethink consumption behaviours to protect environmental quality. (Orecchia, Carlo, and Pietro Zoppoli. "Consumerism and environment: Does consumption behaviour affect environmental quality?." ^v Consumerism encourages people for over-exploitation of the natural resources to meet the growing demand of the production and consumption. This over-exploitation led to the environmental degradation, ecological imbalance, climate change etc. Not only today's world but the future generation will also be affected by the negative impact of consumerist mindset. Due to the demand of consumption different environmental crisis is coming front day by day. Even the plant and animal species are threatened with the changes and forced migrations caused by climate change. Climate change has its effect on the food chain in both plant's animal's world. Regarding this point it has mention in a study that; "Plants are not immune to these threats either. Overexploitation of natural resources, such as deforestation and cultivation of medicinal plants, can result in the loss of plant species and disruption of the balance. (Planque, et al. 2010) Species extinction is a tragedy not only for nature but also for humans. Biodiversity plays an important role in maintaining the balance of nature, providing a source of food and medicine, and supporting the tourism industry."^{vi}

Without knowing different causes of consumerist behaviours, the complete concept of consumerism is not possible at all. To fully understand consumerism, it's important to look beyond basic human needs and consider the deeper reasons behind consumer behaviour. People don't just buy things for survival, they also have emotional and psychological needs like love, belonging, self-esteem, freedom, and creativity. In modern, wealthier societies, these needs are often met through material goods, making consumption a way to express identity and social status. As production increases, companies influence what people want, creating new desires that go beyond actual needs. Over the time, goods become symbols rather than just functional items. Despite the common belief in economics that more consumption leads to progress, many studies show that having more things doesn't necessarily lead to greater happiness or life satisfaction.^{vii} It is very much known that the causes need to remove to overcome from a problem. Adulteration is also a major cause of increasing consumerism. When the increasing demand of the products is seen, the manufacturers start using cheap ingredients mixed with the product so that they can make more profit out of these. In order to meet the requirements buyers, need industries never hesitate to make duplicate product. So, Product duplication is also been considered a significant cause for increasing consumerism, because when the duplicate product cannot meet the requirements of the consumers and the consumer needs to buy more products that increase the consumerism. Another very dangerous cause of consumerism is misleading advertisements; different brands are promoting their product with misleading advertisements. All these advertise make the people believe that buy these products will help them get their status up in the society, though it has nothing to do with the societal status. These also creates competition among neighbours, which is why they focus on consume more than each other. It increases the sales of a product and that is the main reason behind the increasing consumerism in society. Often, industry marketing strategies cleverly exploit human psychology by showcasing large discount percentages. Even when the final price isn't significantly lower than the original, the illusion of a great deal drives people to buy more than they need. This tactic creates a false sense of urgency and value, encouraging impulsive purchases and contributing to the cycle of overconsumption that lies at the heart of modern consumerism. Poor warranty policies and after-sales services also contribute significantly to rising consumerism. While brands often promise high performance at the time of sale, they frequently fail to provide adequate support when products become faulty. As a result, consumers are left with little choice but to replace items sooner than expected, leading to increased and often unnecessary consumption.^{viii} The conservationist approach of consumer has no doubt a direct link with the population problem. The same thing has been noticed by American scientist such as Paul Ehrlich and Garret Hardi. They identified human population growth as the single most important for environmental degradation. The first chapter of the book bestselling book- "*The population Bomb*" written by Ehrlich, has very carefully focused upon the reason. It said; "I have understood the population explosion intellectually for a long time. I came to understand it emotionally one stinking hot night in Delhi a couple of years ago. My wife and daughter and I were returning to our hotel in an ancient taxi. The seats were hopping with fleas. The only functional gear was third. As we crawled through the city, we entered a crowded slum area. The temperature was well over 100, and the air was a haze of dust and smoke. The streets seemed alive with people. People eating, people washing, people sleeping, people visiting, people arguing, and screaming. People thrusting their hands through the taxi window, begging. People defecating and urinating. People clinging to buses. People herding animals. People, people, people, people."^{ix}

Nature Under Pressure: The Changing Face of the Environment in an Age of Rising Consumer Demand and Industrial Growth

We, as Indian are expected to beg forgiveness from the Mother Earth for stepping on her after getting up in every morning. It says that; Samudravasane Prithvi, parvatastan mandale, Vishnupatni namastubhyam, padasparsham kshamaswa me! O earth consort of Vishnu, the Lord of creations, with mountains for thy breasts, and oceans for thy garments, forgive me for stepping on you. Ecosystem-dependent communities are experiencing increasingly limited access to natural capital—the fundamental resources essential for meeting their subsistence needs. This restriction arises from the depletion of these resources due to land degradation, such as the encroachment and overuse of grazing areas, and the conversion of natural forests into monoculture plantations of species like eucalyptus and *Acacia auriculiformis*. Simultaneously, expanding state regulation further curtails access, exemplified by the transformation of formerly 'open access' revenue wastelands into highly regulated reserved forest areas.^x We all should think about one question and that is how much should a person consume? We have got something from the book written by John Kenneth Galbraith, in this book Galbraith very carefully noticed a distinction between "private affluence and public squalor". It says that people in the world becoming more and more consumerist mindset which destroying natural resources as well as availability of all the essential resources for future generation. It has also said that if we're worried about how much we consume, there are a few common solutions people suggest. We can try to increase the supply of materials, reduce how much we waste, make better use of what we already have, or come up with new materials to replace the ones we're running out of. These are all useful steps. But there's a deeper issue we don't often talk about: our constant desire for *more*. This growing appetite for resources is at the heart of the problem. If our demand keeps increasing at the current pace, there will come a time when we simply can't keep up—no matter how much we recycle, substitute, or innovate. At some point, we'll have to ask ourselves whether we can, or should, keep wanting more and more. Yet, strangely, this question almost never comes up in discussions about resource problems. It's as if we've all silently agreed not to mention it. We talk around the issue, focusing only on how to meet demand—not whether that demand is reasonable or sustainable. It's like trying to make roads safer without ever bringing up the fact that people are driving too fast. Everyone knows speed plays a role in accidents, but we pretend it's not part of the conversation. In the same way, we avoid talking about our ever-growing appetite for resources—even though it may be the most important factor of all. Galbraith had identified two major reasons for the silence on consumption. "One was ideological, the worship of the Great God Growth. The principle of Growth (always with that capital G) was a cardinal belief

among the American people; this necessarily implied a continuous increase in the production of consumer goods. The second reason was political: widespread scepticism of the state.” It also says that conservation movement focused on two things. One is threats to human health posed by pollution, and threats to wild species and wild habitats posed by economic expansion.^{xi} The natural resources are belonged to every one equally, but when we go to exploit nature for industries and projects, the risk and negative impacts are not shared equitably. Some people are using more than their share while others are using far too little. Jared Diamond, author of *Collapse*, noted that; “the average rates at which people consume resources like oil and metals, and produce wastes like plastic and greenhouse gases, are about 32 times higher in North America, Western Europe, Japan and Australia than they are in the developing world.”^{xii} It says that we all on planet collectively are consuming more resources than the planet produces each year. We are consuming about 1.4 planets’ worth of bio-capacity resources annually. Overall, the 25 percent of the world’s population in industrialized countries consume about 75 percent of global resources. If we use the natural resources at the current rate then we will need 5 planets to sustain us. Two European-based organizations, Bio-Regional and World Wildlife Fund, have launched; “the One planet Living program to reduce overall resource use, sustain ecological and community health, and ensure that the resources used are shared equitably. In order to achieve these goals, One Planet Living promotes a vastly reduced materials economy alongside new cultural norms that are proportionate to the resources we have.”^{xiii} Let’s look at occurring heavy natural metals. Though these all are in nature, but the scale at we are extracting them and putting them into consumer goods, and distributing them around the planet is unnatural and devastating. It says that global emissions of lead from industrial sources are twenty-seven times higher than lead emissions from natural sources. The author of “The story of the stuff” said that we cannot give up consumption completely. Everyone needs to consume to live, because we need food to eat, a roof over our head, medicine when we are sick, and clothes to keep us warm and dry. And beyond those survival needs, there’s a level of additional consumption that makes life sweeter. Here he explains the consumerism and overconsumption. It has also said that; “while consumption means acquiring and using goods and services to meet one’s needs, consumerism is the particular relationship to consumption in which we seek to meet our emotional and social needs through shopping, and we define and demonstrate our self-worth through the Stuff we own. And overconsumption is when we take far more resources than we need and then the planet can sustain, as is the case in most of the United States as well as a growing number of other countries.”^{xiv}

The world has been shaped by technology and continuing to be so shaped. Technology becomes inhuman in actions, so it is essential now to look at technology itself. We might think weather it is possible to give the human face to technology. Technology with a human face should be our concern to deal with the environmental crisis. It is quite strange to say that though technology is the creation of man, but these are different from human activities. Nature always seems to know when to stop. What’s even more amazing than the way things grow is the way they stop growing at just the right time. Everything in nature has its own limits, its proper size, speed, and strength. Because of that, the natural world, which includes us, tends to stay in balance. It can adjust and heal itself when things go wrong. Technology, on the other hand or rather, people controlled by technology doesn’t have that sense of limit. It doesn’t recognize boundaries when it comes to how big, fast, or powerful things become. As a result, it can’t balance or clean up after itself the way nature does. In the delicate system of the natural world, modern technology acts like something foreign, and we’re now starting to see more and more signs that nature is pushing back. It has been found out that if the modern world continuously shaped by modern technology then we involved in three crises simultaneously; “First, human nature revolts against inhuman technological, organisational, and political patterns, which it experiences as suffocating and debilitating; second, the living environment which supports human life aches and groans and gives signs of partial breakdown; and third, it is clear to anyone fully knowledgeable in the subject matter that the inroads being made into the world’s non-renewable resources, particularly those of fossil fuels, are such that serious bottlenecks and virtual exhaustion loom ahead in the quite foreseeable future.”^{xv} ‘Money buys happiness’ is the idea in consumer societies. Historically there was a good reason for this consumption, but in the last few generation people have lived close to subsistence, so an increase in income brought genuine increases in materials well-being (e.g., food, shelter, health care) and this has produced more happiness. More money more happiness makes the peoples to go for industrialization blindly. So, people in the age of industrialization made a linked in between money and happiness. In this point it has said that; “More money does bring more happiness when we are living on a very low income. However, as a global average, when per capita income reaches the range of \$13,000 per year, additional income adds relatively little to our happiness, while other factors such as personal freedom, meaningful work, and social tolerance add much more.” It proves that in a developed country, double and tripling of the income has not led to increase well-being.^{xvi} Environmental crises caused by exploitation translate into daily crises for the millions of people in India. It is because of the Indians are more directly depended on nature and natural resources. A very large section of India’s population are suffering from different problems like; food insecurity, water shortages, inadequate fuel availability and dislocation of livelihoods with limited alternatives options. The impact of industrialization and consumerism is on the humankind and other species is become not ignorable. In the book “Churning the earth” author have shown a prediction regarding the impact of exploitation in future, it says “For instance, 70 per cent of the country’s vegetation may find the changing ecological conditions hard to cope with, and habitat changes will force animals to move into areas where they are more vulnerable. In the Sundarbans, for instance, changes in salinity due to rising sea levels and possible decrease in the flow of freshwater from inland could threaten several species.”^{xvii}

Conclusion

Industrialization and consumerism together have reshaped the modern world, driven unprecedented economic growth while also introducing profound social and environmental challenges. As industries expanded and production intensified, consumer culture emerged as both a consequence and fuel of this transformation. Rising demand for goods created new opportunities for innovation

and improved standards of living, yet it also deepened society's dependence on continuous consumption. This relentless cycle of production and desire has placed immense pressure on natural systems. Forests, oceans, and ecosystems are strained under the weight of resource extraction, pollution, and waste generated to satisfy ever-growing consumer expectations. The environment's changing face marked by climate change, biodiversity loss, and degraded landscapes stands as a reminder that unchecked industrial growth comes at a cost that future generations will bear.

Ultimately, understanding the intertwined forces of industrialization and consumerism is essential for shaping a more sustainable path forward. Only by recognizing their impacts, rethinking consumption patterns, and adopting cleaner, more responsible industrial practices can societies balance human progress with the preservation of the natural world. The challenge is significant, but so too is the opportunity to redefine development in a way that supports both people and the planet.

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