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## The consumer as citizen: the role of ethics for a sustainable consumption

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### Abstract

The role of ethics, even in its absence, is essential in the economic discourse, despite its shifting through different theories. From the political Aristotelian tradition to the recent reflection about the concept of postmodern society – through the theory of maximizing the personal interest belonging to Utilitarianism– the moral questions and its dilemma, either accepted or rejected as *non sense*, have always indicated the directions to the human acts.

This paper is focused on consumption field seen as the favourite place where emerge all the contradictions of ethical human behaviour (in terms of choice, moral obligations, individual interests etc).

Firstly, the foundations of consumer’s ethical responsibility is explored by addressing the changes from Modernity to Postmodernity and their alternative models of consumption.

It is argued that, paradoxically, the traces of “liquid society” with the fall of social structure, represent the beginning for developing a new kind of consumer defined as *citizen* who is able to embrace a sustainable and moral concept of consumption focused on collective well-being.

Secondly, after having defined the main features of ethical consumer, the paper addresses the role of ethics as the element which makes possible the communication between the two spheres of production and consumption. In this regard, following the dialectic between “rights” and “duties” articulated by Schrader, the responsibility of consumer is showed to be at the foundation of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR).

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## 1. From Modern to Postmodern Consumer: “liquidity” as an opportunity

As Amartya Sen argued in his most influential works (Sen 1987) the modern economics has been progressively detached from ethics and the moral instances which have been always considered by the classical tradition to be at the foundation of human actions.

In fact, in the classic and philosophical thought the reflection above politics and economics behaviour sprung from the public acceptance of moral norms freely respected by all the citizen who shared the same goal: the pursuit of a sovereign Good.

As Aristotle says in *Nicomachean Ethics*:

«the end of this science (= politics) must include the ends of all the others. Therefore, the Good of man must be the end of the science of Politics. [8] For even though it be the case that the Good is the same for the individual and for the state, nevertheless, the good of the state is manifestly a greater and more perfect good, both to attain and to preserve.<sup>1</sup> To secure the good of one person only is better than nothing; but to secure the good of a nation or a state is a nobler and more divine achievement» (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1094b, 8)

Ethics and Politics were naturally tied up because every human being was, firstly, a citizen. It doesn't mean that Aristotle ignored the human nature and its difficulties striving for being a good citizen ("what is common to the greatest number has the least care bestowed upon it. Everyone thinks chiefly of his own, hardly at all of the common interest", *Politics*, book II, chapter 3). Understanding totally the limits of human will, the philosopher addressed the building up of the *polis* as the condition to realise the highest human ends. As we can see a kind of public ethics was at the foundation of every action.

The success of Utilitarianism (Ricardo, Mill, Smith) had opened to the falling down of ethical questions from the economics studies: according to the utilitarian tradition the human rational behaviour would be naturally focused on maximizing the individual interests and personal pleasure with no reference to any moral judgement coming from outside. By identifying wellness with *utilities*, the pivotal idea of utilitarianism became the rationality of choice (see Sen 1987).

To sum up, the relationship between ethics and other practical disciplines, seems to be essential for developing the structure of human choice, either translated as political or economics action.

The same controversial shifting of ethical reflection occurs in the particular dimension of consumption. As the birth and the development of other great cultural concepts, the deep historical process relating to the change of social structure, determined the moral judgment towards consumption.

Fabris stresses the disappearance of the strict social hierarchy in modern time and the opening to the free choice of flexible lifestyles, as the pivotal factor for the upturning in the common evaluation of “consumption” (Fabris 2003).

Influenced by the marxist perspective, modernity has underestimated consumption as a dependent variable of “production” serving the needs of capitalism. Despite Marx states an interdependence between production and consumption («Production is thus at the same time consumption, and consumption is at the same time production. Each is simultaneously its opposite. But an intermediary movement takes place between the two at the same time. Production leads to consumption, for which it provides the material; consumption without production would have no object» Marx 1971), he recognizes an autonomous epistemological status to the former. The consumption is eventually considered the product of the increasing spiral of needs created by the cynical manipulation of capitalistic logic. As a result of this, consumption has become direct expression of social prestige and income as features belonging to upper middle class.

This version of consumption, as Fabris regards, reflects a kind of society strictly structured in classes: possessing commodities is directly both a claim to belonging to a specific class and the expression of its status (Fabris 2003). It means that each concept of consumption is redefined by the kind of society it represents. It explains why the

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