

Consumer culture comes to Central Europe

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Dear ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you for your kind invitation and for the opportunity to present my ideas about consumerism here. I have been working as the director of the Green Circle Office for more than two years and to be here among you is very important and useful for me. I was asked by Donella Meadows to tell you something about how consumerism came to Central Europe. I will talk about the Czech Republic because it is the country I know the best.

2. Definition

Firstly I would like to explain what I mean by consumerism. In my opinion consumerism is

buying for buying. Artificial needs are created to get people to want more than they need, newer and nicer, to collect things, money and property. Big department stores have become the churches of the twentieth century. People spend a lot of time observing and looking for the right things. WHY? It is difficult to answer. People depended on nature before the industrial revolution and now they depend on things. Consumerism seems to be the religion of the end of our century, but consumerism has its roots deeply in our Czech history.

3. History

The consumer culture is not new in Central Europe. It did not begin in 1989, it only has a new form. In the early part of the 15th century the Czech preacher Jan Hus criticised the Catholic churches for property holdings, collecting money, luxurious lifestyle and the desire for power. At this time you could buy at your clean conscience. For your information Jan Hus was burned at the stake for several reasons.

The aristocracy was the consumer society during the Renaissance and Baroque periods.

One positive example against consumerism was our first president Tomáš G. Masaryk. He was personally very modest and encouraged society in Czechoslovakia to honor the small things. In spite of this, Czechoslovakia was ranked third in industrial production in Europe at the beginning of the 20th century.

During the occupation of Czechoslovakia by the Nazis the Jews were used as a physical resource. Their property was consumed by other people-either Nazis or collaborationists. Even their bodies were consumed by this sick consumer culture.

Under the communists, materialism was the main ideology. The communist government needed busy people, not people critically thinking about the political situation. People were motivated to have things such as country houses, cars and to eat more than necessary. I remember people being proud of their big bellies and saying this is our socialism that nobody can take from us. People obeyed and spent a lot of time developing their life styles, but the communists tried to control this. No private sector was allowed. There was limited travel and limited information. People envied their western richer neighbors and did everything to be on their level. Jiří Ruml, spokes person for Charta 77 in 1984 said that in order to have material things the Czech people gave up their conscience, their honor, truth and their dignity and called this "consumer socialism".

3. After the Velvet Revolution

After the Velvet Revolution consumerism continues in another way. The Velvet Revolution opened the borders and new freedom brought the promise of new political possibilities and gave promise for people to consume openly without limit. Our president Václav

Havel dreamt that truth and love will win above lie and hatred, talked about ethics and modesty. But unfortunately, his own staff at the Prague castle began to buy new Italian furniture, new BMW cars and their human relations did not present a very good practical example for our nation. Our minister of finance, who is now our Prime Minister Václav Klaus, said we needed to tighten our belts, but at the same time our new Parliament instead of creating legislation for modesty and tightening the belt rise their own salaries and then went on vacation.

Václav Klaus encouraged the consumer culture through the privatization process which was supported by Viktor Kožený. He was a student at Harvard, saw the opportunity to make an intense profit in the privatization process, returned home to buy stockshares of Czech citizens. He established the Harvard Fund and now he owns 10 % of the Czech stock market. He inspired the Czech people's interest in owning property through stocks.

People started to be very busy partly because they changed their lives, partly because they fall into the consumption machinery. The new freedom opened new life possibilities and a lot of new challenges. People saw their big chance in life to be rich, to be important, they began to be members of several organizations, members of several boards. They wanted to be everywhere, do everything forgetting that they have partners, children, friends, that the day has only 24 hours and their lives are limited to seventy or eighty.

For instance my friend Pavel and his wife Alena were my best friends during the Communist era. We were interested in literature, in culture, we spread Charta 77 and samizdat information. After the Revolution we do not have time to meet. Pavel is president of several organizations. Alena is a successful translator and interpreter and I am busy at the Green Circle. The relations between people inside families are worse, people spend much less time with their children and partners. They need to make business or attract it.

5. Problems

These possibilities of being rich fall short of the expectations of the Czech people. They have become disillusioned because of new money scandals in the privatization process and the money practices of our political people and parties is something that discourages the Czechs from believing in anybody or anything.

After five years of the leadership of Václav Klaus and the development of our market economy, the new consumerism is an important part of Czech life. When you come to visit us you will see huge advertisements everywhere. You will know that Lucky Strike and Marlboro is the best for you, you will see a lot of cars on the street, you will have troubles crossing the street. For example while there were 25 cars for every 100 people in our country in 1989, in 1993 there were 29 cars. This number grows because having a car is the sign of a better living standard. Only a few people think that this situation in our small country is absurd. There was very good public transportation and there is no more room

for building new roads and parking places.

I would like to show you an example of environmental damage cause by consumerism. There are some geographical paintings which show how the Ěeský kras changed from 1890. The illustrations are projected to 2096. This is example of how consumerism is affecting the extraction of limestone and the Czech land scape.

6. What to do with consumerism?

The Czech Republic is an old country with a very rich cultural tradition. In my opinion the biggest fault is that on the top of the society is the analytical man´s narrow thinking government and the consumption myth helps them to keep power and to manipulate people easily.

It is important to:

Bring more women with the synthetical way of thinking into public life and encourage them to be active in decision-making,

Follow our good historical and cultural traditions,

Show people that real freedom is the personal independence and common responsibility as Stephen Covey said,

Learn ourselves to be active on our own,

Bring more interest and excitement into human lives about ecological action,

Teach ourselves how to enjoy life and have more joy and positive energy in everyday life.

7. What organization that I manage is doing?

Zelený kruh´s building provides office space for several environmental groups. It has created space not only for these groups but for the community through its daycare center and its green project. It is important for our common communication.

It is planning a tree planting project for Lublaòská Street where it is located.

The organization is planning publication in English and Czech of the book, Zdaø Bùh Libkovice. Text and photographs from the book center around the impacts of coal mining on the lives of the people who live, or lived, in Libkovice.

Project informing about using recycle paper.

Educational program of Dennis Meadow's games Fish Banks and Stratagem, teaching people to communicate better and to work as a team.

Women's project improving communication between schools and parents.

8. What this group can do?

Let me say again that I am very happy to have possibility to take part on Balaton group meeting. I do feel that Czech environmental movement need a support. I will do my best to disseminate the insights and conclusion from this meeting among Czech people.

I would like to offer you to organize an international conference in the Czech Republic before our elections in June 1996 about the Consumption, GATT and WTO around the Earth Day - April 22nd.