

Not just at Christmas time...

Can consumers put the world right?

Whether it's climate change, child labor in "developing" countries (and not just there) or lousy food: "mankind" with its "greed-is-cool mentality" is very quickly cited as the cause of all the misery in the modern world. "Consumerism" might be another word for this mentality.

This is contrasted with the conscious consumer who buys sustainable or even organic and fair trade items. The nice idea behind it: if all consumers opted for goods that were produced under ecologically and ethically sound conditions, companies would be forced to operate according to these standards in their own interests. So it is said.

Let's take a closer look at this fabulous consumer and his fantastic possibilities.

A fully functioning market economy ...

First of all, it is not insignificant what the consumer has to deal with when he enters the scene. Because it is a whole ready-made world of production, sales and profit-making that he encounters when he starts making his wishes, purchasing decisions and "consumption".

In this world, capitalist companies use every means possible to reduce their costs and increase their profits. As is well known, they produce for *this* purpose, and not in order to enable mankind to consume in a brisk or even morally impeccable manner.

Since "globalization" was completed, they have been able to do this worldwide without any major problems. They mobilize every scrap of cheap labour, interesting natural resources and potential sales markets in order to secure the largest possible share of global purchasing power. In this world and its profit calculations, for example, it is worth sending goods halfway around the globe with immense energy expenditure and pollutant emissions in order to exploit the cheapest wages or to drain the last remaining solvency. For example, North Sea shrimp is shipped to Africa to be peeled and then returned to Germany for sale; German potatoes are shipped to Poland to be washed, or pigs from Northern Germany are processed into Parma ham in Italy and, after crossing the Alps a second time, are placed on the refrigerated shelves in Germany and elsewhere.

Actions of this kind may cause people to shake their heads, but they are in fact the order of the day because they make total economic sense under the prevailing conditions, i.e. they are *profitable*.

The states that set up and oversee this market-based mode of production not only fail to prevent this logistical madness, which would have been held against any planned economy as a total failure. Quite the opposite: as guardians of their location (economy), which is supposed to be competitive at all costs, they practically help the calculations of their lively entrepreneurs into the world by building the necessary highways and airports and laying fiber optic cables so that enough can be traded on the Internet. On top of that, they enforce a "flexible labor market" that mobilizes millions of workers who, in addition to transporting goods, pollute the environment with exhaust fumes, etc.

...elegantly freed from its irrationality

Our consumers are now supposed to balance out this mode of production, which is based entirely on the laws of capitalist rationality, through their "conscious" purchasing decisions.

However, of course, they should do so without touching the capitalist profit interest itself. Because that would be forbidden. Or socialism. In any case, it doesn't work. Messing with the businessmen's economic trade, which causes the damage complained about in the first place, is completely out of the question from the outset if you are supposed to save the world "as a consumer".

Instead, the deplored grievances are to be eliminated, so to speak, inherent in the system: By allowing the mass of consumers to influence production through their purchasing decisions, everything is to be steered onto the right path quite elegantly and without the need to even raise any real opposition to the calculations that have prevailed to date.

However, this idea initially involves a slight reinterpretation of how the market economy works.

Because the profit interests of companies depend on the goods ultimately being paid for by the "end consumer", so the responsibility for "undesirable developments" is shifted back onto the buyers - as if they had had a say in the range of goods and the establishment of the production, which is as wage squeezing as it is environmentally damaging, s.a. the choice of trade routes, etc.

And when our consumers turn over the euros or dollars in their wallets again, as is their way, they don't want to realize that, as wage earners with their greed-is-cool mentality, they themselves are merely a component and product of these bills.

Instead, they immediately get to hear the next accusation: That it is only because of their desire for "cheap goods" that not only the cost of goods but also the cost of labor is so high, so in the end it's because of *them* that the whole world looks the way it does: Potatoes from the Nile, cherries from Turkey, green asparagus from Peru - all this only exists "because of 'the consumer'!"

The proof: you only have to register where all the crap ends up. Because 'the consumer' buys what is offered and pays attention to the price in good market economy fashion, he/she is not only to blame for the fact that farmers no longer plant orchards, but also he/she bears responsibility for the increase in child labor or for how Christian seafaring today manages global trade with its container ships - according to the motto: He who has the damage does not have to worry about the mockery.

Our consumers are now asked to use the "power" which they supposedly have, to force companies to produce less harmful goods.

In fact, the opposite is true here as well: After all, the consumers are dependent on having to cope with the capitalist supply of goods in every situation which they encounter as a result of the various profit calculations. These facts, however, are turned upside-down: this dependency becomes leverage that the consumer supposedly has against the owners of these goods.

Even those who cannot talk enough about their responsibility admit that they do not have the freedom to refrain from shopping at all. But at least they could buy "consciously": inform and educate themselves, find and buy environmentally friendly products, punish a bad company by skipping on their products, and so on.

If our consumers took this seriously, it would firstly be a pretty full-time job. And secondly, it would be one in which they would always lag behind the "funny" ideas of companies on how to increase their profits a little more with a few new hormones, genetic engineering, pesticides, cheaper production sites, toxic substitutes, and, of course and always: low wages.

At the same time, of course, "the consumer" could only do his job by filling the coffers of another company that is, of course, just as profit-oriented. A company that is somehow not quite so bad - or at least pretends to be, whose products look healthy, preferably even have an organic or fair trade label...

Even if it is by no means possible to say that there are any products on the market that even come close to meeting the required standards, the logic of the comparison helps to make things look a little better.

And, of course, there is also this funny twist to the story: in the idea of consumer responsibility, the owners of higher incomes necessarily behave more "sensibly" and "ethically correctly" - simply because they have more financial freedom to use the highest energy efficiency class by switching to an electric car or buying a new heating system with alternative energy, etc.

The moral of the story: "We all" have "the responsibility"

All in all, it's a really nice idea.

Admittedly, it is not particularly logical. When you think it through, it quickly becomes clear that there is no question of "we" in our role as consumers having even the slightest possibility of exerting influence. But this somehow presupposes the idea of "responsibility".

In this respect, it is not about a somehow practical means of getting to grips with the damage that the market economy "brings with it", which can be seen in every nook and cranny.

But the idea is all the more suitable for blaming "all of us" for the moral responsibility for the repeated accusations of all kinds of unpleasant consequences of this mode of production. Because buying and living from it in this way is something that everyone does.

In this respect, "we" are *all* sinners who have to beat our own chests. And can and must strive throughout our lives to become better and to shop more consciously. This, somehow, does prove we are also good people, of course.

A modern religion, without church and Pope...