

Consuming Ourselves to Death: How Consumerism Stabilises an Unsustainable Society

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Received: September 27, 2026

Accepted: October 23, 2026

Published: October 27, 2026

doi: 10.65343/tpss.v2i4.164

URL: <https://doi.org/10.65343/tpss.v2i4.164>

Abstract

How is a peaceful coexistence amid diversity on a finite planet possible? This article addresses this question through a cultural and social analysis of consumerism. Consumerism is interpreted not only as an objective of modernisation but also as a mechanism for stabilising societies characterised by social inequality, status competition, and weak forms of democracy. Since the globalisation of the Western model of development has led to a permanent war among human beings and against nature, a way out cannot lie in defending this model, but rather in its sustainable transformation. Alongside cultural change, social relations and democracy must be placed on new foundations, building bridges instead of walls.

Keywords: consumerism, cultural dimension, social dimension, sustainability transformation

1. Introduction

The Anthropocene, the geological epoch dominated by human activity, represents the culmination of the idea of progress encapsulated in Bacon's maxim "knowledge is power". Through industrialisation, this progress has enabled humanity to transform the Earth into commodities. The massive impact of our species is symbolised by the year 2020, when, for the first time in history, the combined mass of all human-made objects exceeded the planet's total biomass (Elhacham et al., 2020). Yet even progress has not been able to free itself entirely from the laws of thermodynamics and ecology. If, in nature, "there is no such thing as a free lunch" (Commoner, 1971), the same applies to progress, since neither economic growth nor mass consumption occurs in a vacuum but entails substantial environmental costs. According to the second law of thermodynamics – the law of entropy – the total costs of any material and energy-based activity always exceed the local benefits generated within a system. If these costs are not necessarily perceived, this is only because they manifest themselves elsewhere in space and time. The progress and consumerism of some entail regression and deprivation for many others, including nature and future generations.

Any increase in order within a system therefore inevitably generates increasing disorder in its environment, as evidenced by the polycrisis we are currently experiencing. This crisis can be interpreted as an expression of the ecological and social environment's resistance to the development model that has dominated thus far, given that "where there is power, there is resistance" (Foucault, 2014, p. 84). Yet the polycrisis is now reversing established power relations, reminding us that every system depends far more on its environment than the environment depends on the system. While modern notions of progress have encouraged the illusion that human beings can dominate the environment as an object, the convergence of today's ecological, economic, and social crises confronts us not only with the limits of the planet but also with the limits of human beings themselves. By its very nature, the human mind is unable to fully grasp the complexity of its environment. Paradoxically, it is precisely in the Anthropocene that the loss of control is becoming an increasingly common human experience. This led Bruno Latour (2000), in his new political ecology, to recognise even "things" as social actors ("actants") capable of influencing our destiny. That nature is not a passive object to be manipulated at will was demonstrated, for example, by an invisible virus such as COVID-19, which in 2020 was able to bring the global economy to a standstill. The agency of "things" is also manifested through finite resources such as oil, on which consumerism makes us particularly dependent. We become especially aware of this dependence when demand for oil exceeds supply, driving up prices.

The end of the illusion that the world can be fully controlled has led, over recent decades, to a massive proliferation of fortified borders around Western societies, aimed at containing risks and keeping growing disorder at a distance. Yet this strategy is ultimately self-defeating, since such barriers also shield the systemic causes of that disorder. These walls prevent us from perceiving the real costs of our model of development, sparing us the uncomfortable

experience of having to look the victims of our consumerism in the eye. Because the environment is not only external but also internal, the contradictions and disorder generated by this model inevitably manifest themselves within our own societies as well. Poverty and the erosion of democracy are therefore not confined to distant regions but are also present within Western countries, as are the fences and barriers erected to protect centres of power and the gated communities of privileged social groups. Despite all such attempts at containment, climate change demonstrates that, on a finite planet, our relationship with the environment ultimately rebounds upon us. In the summer of 2026, heatwaves caused more than 15,000 deaths in Germany alone (RKI, 2026).

One law of the universe is that the environment always outlives its systems. Yet there is a further reason to regard the current polycrisis as more systemic than environmental: it is not an unexpected natural catastrophe, but rather the almost inevitable consequence of the development model pursued thus far by the Western-style social system. While capitalism and the Industrial Revolution were not the result of a unified project, the development paradigm that emerged after the Second World War was the product of conscious and coordinated political and economic decisions (Sachs, 1998, p. 6; Beck, 2008, p. 17). The United States in particular assumed a leading role in the global diffusion of a specific development model based on economic growth and mass consumption. By theorising the consumer society as the most advanced stage of social progress, the American economist and presidential adviser Walt Whitman Rostow (1960) contributed significantly to the elevation of the US model of society into a universal paradigm of modernisation. First through the Marshall Plan and later through neoliberal globalisation, this paradigm spread across the world. Even Russia and China adopted capitalism and consumerism, joining the same global market and the same competition for resources. A social system founded on competition, economic growth, and consumerism necessarily presupposes continuous expansion. On a finite planet, the globalisation of this dynamic has resulted in a permanent war: not only among human beings but also against nature. From this perspective, it is hardly surprising that the United States, the country that more than any other has embodied and promoted the consumer society, has for decades maintained the world's highest level of military expenditure (Note 1). Growing geopolitical rivalry is therefore not a deviation from the process of globalisation, but one of its structural consequences (Polanyi, 1974 [1944]; Harari, 2019, p. 34).

If sustainability means addressing the causes of crises rather than merely their symptoms, it requires today not the defence or even expansion of an unsustainable system, but its transformation. The path that has led us into the current polycrisis cannot be the one that will lead us out of it. If this crisis is an expression of conflicts between the system and its ecological and social environment, overcoming it first requires an understanding of the foundations upon which consumer society has been built. For this reason, the next section focuses on culture. As the “DNA of society” (Brocchi, 2026, p. 532), culture regulates both the society's internal metabolism and its exchanges with the environment. The ecological footprint of a society is profoundly shaped by the conception of the human being on which it is based: whether that of *homo oeconomicus* or *homo solidaricus*. Yet even the most sustainable culture has no social impact unless it is communicated through a medium, while even the most unsustainable one can cause considerable harm when amplified by the mass media. Without the daily bombardment of advertising, a society of mass consumption would be unthinkable.

The following section addresses the social dimension. Modern society rests on two pillars: while John Locke's and Adam Smith's *homo oeconomicus* found its embodiment in the market economy, Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* became institutionalised in the authority of the modern state. Both conceptions are characterised by a profound distrust of human nature, giving rise to a society incapable of sharing. The author's thesis is that, within this highly unstable social construction, economic growth and mass consumption fulfil a compensatory function, acting as artificial social glue and stabilisers. This becomes evident during periods of economic recession, when social conflicts immediately re-emerge. A corollary of this thesis is that both the exploitation of nature and imperial expansionism should be understood as strategies for externalising society's internal conflicts.

How is peaceful coexistence amid diversity on a finite planet possible? This is one of the central questions of the twenty-first century. The final part of this contribution briefly outlines several pathways towards sustainable transformation.

2. The Cultural Dimension of Consumerism

If the evolution of life on Earth over the past 3.8 billion years appears to contradict the entropic tendency of the universe towards disorder, this is due to the negentropic effect of information (Zeh, 2005, p. 43). As a “difference that makes a difference” (Bateson, 2000 [1972], p. 459), information channels energy and matter, organising them into systems that distinguish themselves from their environment. While DNA constitutes the informational system on which biological systems are based, culture performs the same function for social systems. Human beings' fundamental needs are defined by their biology, whereas their superfluous needs are shaped by culture. It follows that consumerism, as an expression of the “affluent society” (Galbraith, 1958), is a phenomenon that is more cultural than biological.

Culture is the strategy that enables a cognitively and physically limited being such as the human one to reduce

complexity to forms and scales that are comprehensible and manageable for it, and it does so on two distinct levels:

- In the *social construction of reality* (Berger and Luckmann, 1966), culture functions as a “cognitive map”, enabling individuals to orient themselves within their environment (the “territory”) and to coordinate their actions. When institutions and individuals embark on a particular developmental trajectory, they orient themselves according to their mental map rather than to the territory it represents. The linguist Alfred Korzybski (2005 [1933]) used this metaphor in *Science and Sanity* to explain the origins of both social and individual pathologies. Since “the map is not the territory it represents” (ibid., p. 58), there is always the possibility of taking the wrong path and ending up in a dead end, or, in the case of a society, entering a crisis or, in the worst case, facing collapse. For example, the mental map that has guided capitalist societies has been characterised, among other things, by the ideological dogma that markets function best when liberalised and deregulated. Social anthropologist Karl Polanyi (1974, p. 6) warned against this “stark utopia” as early as 1944 in *The Great Transformation*, arguing that a self-regulating market “could not exist for any length of time without annihilating the human and natural substance of society; it would have physically destroyed man and transformed his surroundings into a wilderness.” Polanyi himself had witnessed the chain of developments that preceded the Second World War: the liberalisation of markets, the First World War, growing social and political polarisation, the financial crash of 1929, the rise of authoritarian regimes in Germany and elsewhere, and ultimately the greatest tragedy of the twentieth century. Polanyi died in 1964, and his warnings went largely unheeded. Since the 1980s, however, governments in many countries have once again embraced the “stark utopia”. The fact that history appears to be repeating itself, and that various forms of regression can be observed today, constitutes a significant indicator of a society internally trapped in a “culture as usual” (Brocchi, 2026, p. 260). If a society remains attached to its culture even when that culture is leading it towards the abyss, this is because the value of a culture rests less on its correspondence with reality than on its intersubjective sharing. Through everyday communication, social actors continuously reaffirm particular “imagined orders” until they come to appear necessary and indispensable, not because they are true, but because they make a particular form of living together possible (Harari, 2015, p. 110). The greater the mental homogeneity of a group or society, the stronger the conviction that what people believe and do is simply “normal”. Thus, in a monetised society, people tend to regard money as more indispensable to their survival than trees. In a consumer society, consumption itself becomes a means of belonging to the community, whereas those who refrain from air travel and do not even own a smartphone are often perceived as “deviant”.
- In the *social construction of the environment*, culture functions as a design model through which human beings, by means of labour and technology, transform an environment into a system that appears ordered, comprehensible, and controllable. If “the map is not the territory it represents”, the territory itself can be transformed until it appears to conform to the map. The same “values” that act as cognitive filters in the selective perception of reality (Hofstede, 2009, p. 9) are materialised in the design of products: what is considered desirable, useful, and beautiful is reproduced and enhanced, whereas what is regarded as useless, harmful, or ugly is marginalised or eliminated. Plants that are useful to humans are cultivated; weeds are eradicated. In this way, progress has enabled us to transform nature from “raw material” into a valuable commodity and to replace intricate and unpredictable forests with urban settlements experienced as orderly and secure. Modern science has not necessarily led to a greater understanding of complexity; rather, it has vastly increased our power to control it, reducing it, in the extreme case, to monocultures. Monocultures – whether ecological, economic, or political – are highly efficient but at the same time prone to crises and particularly vulnerable. Every monoculture implies the absence of alternatives, giving rise to the paradox that even the causes of crises can be repackaged as solutions. The more the current polycrisis deepens, the stronger the demand becomes for economic growth, market deregulation, technological progress, and a revival of consumption. The risk of crisis and collapse increases the more a culture becomes rigid through its institutionalisation and materialisation in infrastructures, thereby reducing both the sensitivity of the social system to its dynamic environment and its learning capacity. Individuals are educated not only by other individuals but also by normality, objects, technologies, and spaces, since “first we shape our buildings, and afterwards our buildings shape us” (Winston Churchill). A city designed for cars and commerce produces people oriented towards cars and commerce. Within an unsustainable infrastructure, sustainable behaviour itself becomes the more costly option: why buy regional products when a well-stocked supermarket can be found on every street corner? Once a culture has been set in concrete, it exerts a profound influence on human behaviour for generations and becomes much more difficult to change.

The ability to build the world as we perceive it and to perceive the world as we have built it tends to suppress contradictions and alternatives within the boundaries of social systems. Through the industrial materialisation of “monocultures of the mind” (Shiva, 1998), modern progress has led us to live within a gigantic perceptual bubble. Within this bubble, both the culture of spectacle and consumerism function as a kind of anaesthetic, dulling our

sensitivity to reality (Postman, 1985; Brocchi, 2026, p. 250). Any form of incest – whether genetic or mental – tends to increase the vulnerability of species and systems. The same applies to monocultures. For this reason, evolution, unlike modern progress, has favoured the expansion of diversity rather than that of monocultures. UNESCO (2001) itself has recognised the principle that cultural diversity is as important for the resilience of social systems as biodiversity is for ecosystems. Human evolution followed this path for millennia: from the earliest protocultures emerged an extraordinary diversity of cultures. It is precisely this diversity that enabled our species to adapt and survive over long periods under highly diverse environmental conditions.

Profoundly different cognitive maps of the same “territory” can coexist even within the same society. Thus, in the West, different conceptions of the human being coexist: whereas for the philosopher Thomas Hobbes human nature is fundamentally selfish, for Jean-Jacques Rousseau “man is naturally good and becomes wicked only because of social institutions” (cited in Bregman, 2022, p. 66). The greater the diversity of perspectives within a society, the broader the range of options available for addressing its problems. The West, however, has often tended to reduce this complexity through the hierarchisation of cultures and perspectives. Much like Plato, who stratified his ideal polis by placing philosophers at the top and peasants at the bottom of the social pyramid, the West proclaimed itself “modern” in contrast to traditional societies. In modern society, it is the task of expert elites – as representatives of high culture (*Hochkultur*) – to lead the uninitiated masses towards the future. Whereas traditional cultures are regarded as archaic and Indigenous cultures as primitive, modernity presents itself as emancipated from the state of nature (Latour, 2018). This hierarchical opposition between culture and nature, civilisation and barbarism, subjects and objects is the same one that materialises in the “immunisation” of social systems through visible and invisible walls (Esposito, 2002). Distance from nature and tradition becomes a status symbol, expressed also in the sterile aesthetics of consumerism. On supermarket shelves, we find the same products all year round, seemingly detached from both time and place, while their histories and contexts remain hidden behind glossy plastic packaging. A similar aesthetic sterility also characterises functionalist architecture and body culture, which seeks to conceal or discipline the body's natural dimension (Kries, 2010).

Within this worldview, cultural otherness is reduced to a deficit to be overcome through a linear and upward process of social development known as “modernisation”. If “mass consumption” is regarded as the highest stage of development a society can attain (Rostow, 1960), others can be defined as “poor” and “underdeveloped” only because they do not possess what we possess: cars, refrigerators, electricity, and so on. Since the end of the Second World War, the spread of consumerism to other societies has consequently come to be conceived as a form of “development aid” (Sachs, 1998, p. 7). Even in Italian and German cities, neighbourhoods considered backward have often been “upgraded” in recent decades through the construction of a shopping centre. If mass consumption represents the most advanced stage of modernisation, then economic growth constitutes its principal driving force. Those who seek to overcome poverty and promote greater freedom and democracy therefore need do nothing more than foster economic growth (Merkel, 1999, p. 83). Both mass consumption and economic growth are legitimised through the idea of a supposedly selfish and insatiable human instinct: indeed, the theorists of the market economy, John Locke and Adam Smith, shared the same anthropological assumptions as Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan*. Since the market economy is regarded as the form of economic organisation most consistent with human nature, it ultimately comes to appear without alternative.

One reason why Polanyi wrote *The Great Transformation* was to overturn “the liberal idea that market society represents a ‘natural’ endpoint in the development of human society” (Salsano, 1974, p. XV) (Note 2). Indeed, the economy itself is culture, and within the diversity of cultures the market economy does not represent the norm but rather a “singular aberration” (ibid., p. XVIII). Polanyi had studied pre-industrial European economies and was familiar with the research of ethnologists such as Malinowski. In both cases, the natural purpose of the economy is the subsistence of the community, not the maximisation of profit; socio-economic relations are based on sharing and redistribution rather than privatisation and competition.

The profoundly social nature of human beings is also demonstrated by the “elementary communism” that characterises the economy of every family (Bregman, 2022, p. 336), where trust, rather than money, functions as the medium of exchange. While in the “self-regulating market” even nature is degraded to a “fictitious commodity” (Polanyi, 1974, p. 88), for Indigenous peoples of the Andes tropical forests are home rather than environment, *Pachamama* (Mother Earth) rather than “raw material”. Many traditional cultures prefer a life of simplicity to our consumerism, so that, according to the German ethnologist Dieter Kramer (2001, p. 96), “even seemingly poor societies possess distinctive forms of wealth”.

The relativity of culture implies its transformability, that is, its capacity to learn through difference. What has hindered this capacity, however, has been relations of power. From colonisation to globalisation, Western states have acted as a “gardener” (Bauman, 1991), seeking to order and domesticate the planet by suppressing forms of diversity deemed superfluous or ungovernable. The global increase in entropy has therefore also been a consequence of the eradication of local cultures, since what appears to us as “weeds” may elsewhere constitute an

essential element of ecological and social balance. Through his work, Polanyi implied that, had market society truly been the outcome of a spontaneous evolution of socio-economic relations, so much violence would not have been necessary to impose it (Salsano, 1974, p. XXI). Yet every form of violence, whether physical or structural, suffers from a major drawback: it generates resistance. To reduce such resistance, power has progressively transformed its modes of operation. Rather than manifesting itself openly through coercion, it has learned to operate in increasingly subtle ways, eventually concealing itself behind the liberal and democratic institutions of modern society (Foucault, 1975). In *The Civilizing Process*, Norbert Elias (1988) argued that modern society did not abolish traditional forms of authority but rather internalised them, so that the state, the Church, and capital continue to exercise their power from within individuals to this day. Control has been transformed into self-control, censorship into self-censorship. Even more effective, however, is power that has been internalised in the form of desire or need, as consumerism demonstrates so vividly.

Antonio Gramsci (1996) questioned why subordinate social groups such as workers and peasants would support political and social arrangements contrary to their own interests. This question led him to develop the concept of “cultural hegemony”, elaborated in the *Prison Notebooks* to explain how consent can contribute to the reproduction of relations of domination. Today, we might ask a similar question: how is it possible that even those who suffer most from the consequences of consumerism, for example in the Global South, often come to desire it and thereby contribute to its reproduction? One possible answer points to those forms of power that operate through cultural strategies of *soft power*. Their distinctive character was captured by Neil Postman in the introduction to *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, where he compares two famous dystopian novels: George Orwell's *1984* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*.

“Orwell feared those who would deprive us of information. Huxley feared those who would give us so much that we would be reduced to passivity and egoism. Orwell feared that the truth would be concealed from us. Huxley feared the truth would be drowned in a sea of irrelevance. Orwell feared we would become a captive culture. Huxley feared we would become a trivial culture, preoccupied with some equivalent of the feelies, the orgy porgy, and the centrifugal bumblepuppy [...]. In *1984*, Huxley added, “people are controlled by inflicting pain. In *Brave New World*, they are controlled by inflicting pleasure [...]. This book is about the possibility that Huxley, not Orwell, was right” (Postman, 1985, pp. VII-VIII).

In strategies of soft power, the “mental programming” of the masses (Hofstede, 2009, p. 2) plays a central role. One of the most effective techniques is *propaganda*, developed by the American journalist Edward Bernays (1928). As the nephew of Sigmund Freud, Bernays was well aware that the unconscious exerts a greater influence on human behaviour than rational consciousness. He therefore argued that effective mass persuasion should appeal to deep-seated fears and desires rather than to rational deliberation. Propaganda techniques were subsequently refined and employed on a large scale in Nazi Germany, but they also found wide application in democratic societies, for example through advertising. Some studies estimate that the average person in Germany is exposed to between 3,000 and 10,000 advertising messages every day (Kreiß, 2017), whose underlying message is: “Buy, buy, buy!” If such mental bombardment begins in childhood, consumerism is likely to become rooted sooner or later in the unconscious, eventually taking the form of an “artificial instinct” (Harari, 2015, p. 163). For those who have been socialised in this way for decades, sustainability and degrowth can only appear as forms of deprivation.

Modernisation and globalisation have thus advanced through a “colonisation of the imaginary” (Latouche, 2014a). If, in the 1950s, the Marshall Plan was also an operation aimed at expanding the market for American products, Hollywood played an equally important role in creating the desire to purchase them. This dynamic was subsequently replicated throughout the world. As the lifestyle of the Western middle class is projected through television, glossy magazines, novels and, eventually, the internet, it first becomes a status symbol and then a social norm. There is no longer any need to expand one's interests by force once people themselves have internalised the desire to live “like an American”, whatever the cost. While consumerism is associated with freedom in propaganda, in reality it tends to generate a form of servitude based on induced needs that must be continually satisfied, whether through overtime work or indebtedness.

3. The Social Dimension of Consumerism

In recent decades, NATO (2001) has frequently legitimised itself as a “community of values” engaged in a struggle against terrorism and autocracy. The values most often associated with the Alliance are freedom and democracy. Yet, on closer examination, the West itself remains far from fully realising these ideals. Profound distrust in human nature leads to viewing citizens' freedom as a potential source of anarchy. It was for this reason that Hobbes grounded the authority of the modern state in humanity's “fear” (Esposito, 2004, p. 37). Through its monopoly on the use of force, his *Leviathan* guaranteed a mechanical order in which every individual was expected to function as a cog in the machine. Even today, in Germany, a neighbourhood lacks the authority to determine the use of its own street. If local residents decide to close it to motor traffic even for a single day, their decision remains subject to approval by public authorities and to compliance with numerous rules, regulations, and bureaucratic

requirements (Brocchi, 2017). In Western societies, the freedom to consume thus appears to function as a surrogate for the lack of freedom to co-create society. The gradual transformation of the “citizen” into a “consumer” (Bauman, 2007) is reflected in a state that treats residents as “consumers of services” provided by municipal “customer centres” (*Kundenzentren*) (Note3). In a “strong democracy” (Barber, 2004), by contrast, citizens themselves would be the true owners of public institutions. Distrust of self-government has favoured representative democracy, in which citizens delegate their power to parties and elected representatives. Where this can lead was demonstrated by the political scientists Martin Gilens and Benjamin Page in their study of American democracy: when the majority of citizens disagree with economic elites and/or organised interest groups, the preferences of the latter prevail in congressional decision-making in most cases (Gilens & Page, 2014, p. 576). Neoliberal globalisation has further reinforced this imbalance in many countries by shifting increasing shares of power from parliaments to executives and from politics to markets. That these post-democratic developments (Crouch, 2004) coincided with the rise of commercial television, the spread of the culture of spectacle, and a further expansion of consumerism can hardly be regarded as mere coincidence.

It is therefore the ecological footprint, rather than power itself, that has been democratised: the average US citizen lives as if five planets were available, the average German as if three, and the average Italian as if 2.7. Even the Scandinavian countries, which consistently rank among the world's leading democracies, live as if they had between 3.6 planets (Norway) and 4.2 planets (Denmark) at their disposal (Global Footprint Network, 2022). Since only one planet is available, the excess consumption of some necessarily comes at the expense of others, including future generations and nature. This suggests that the internal social peace of Western societies has been achieved by making large segments of the population complicit, through consumerism, in what the sociologists Ulrich Brand and Markus Wissen (2021) call an “imperial mode of living” (*Imperiale Lebensweise*). The form of democracy realised in the West therefore still appears to be marked by a profound original flaw. In the ancient *agora*, Athenian citizens met regularly to decide together the fate of their polis, but this democratic right was reserved for a minority consisting of free male citizens. Women, slaves, and resident foreigners were excluded from it (Wood, 2015). The unstable combination of democracy and social inequality was stabilised, to some extent, by the exploitation of slaves and by the resources flowing from the Athenian Empire, since the benefits of these arrangements accrued not only to the elites but indirectly also to broad sections of the citizen body.

Modern society, too, was built on similar foundations. While the colonisation of other continents contributed decisively to the rise of capitalism, industrialisation in Britain was built on the exploitation of the proletariat. It was above all John Locke (1988 [1690]) who inscribed the imperative of economic growth into the cultural DNA of this society. His reasoning was as follows: in a society composed of self-interested individuals, scarcity fuels dissatisfaction, intensifies competition, and generates conflict. The continuous growth of wealth is therefore what pacifies society by satisfying everyone's interests. To make such growth possible, the appropriation of overseas territories and the exploitation of nature represented for Locke not merely a legitimate right, but a duty (Rifkin, 1981, pp. 24–25). Expansion and exploitation thus become the other side of the coin of a society that is unable to share and redistribute wealth and power fairly within itself, not least because this would require the expropriation of acquired privileges.

In the modern state, economic growth and consumerism contribute to social peace by making it possible to progressively increase the prosperity of all social classes without reducing the inequalities between them, much like a Paternoster lift: all the cabins move upward while remaining one above the other (Butterwegge, 2020, p. 110). While human beings as “naked apes” are largely equal, their social inequality is expressed through *habitus*: in holiday destinations, residential neighbourhoods, home furnishings, cars, clothing, and even manners and tastes at the dining table (Bourdieu, 1984). Through consumption, people publicly display either their membership in a particular social class or milieu, or their aspiration to belong to it. In a context of status competition, what matters is not what one possesses, but what one possesses more of than others (Hirsch, 1976). This comparison is primarily *horizontal*: the chief executive of a large industrial corporation compares his or her wealth with that of other executives rather than with that of the company's workers. If the average income of an executive amounts to six million euros per year, an income of only three million may be perceived within that social group as a form of disadvantage. At the top of the social pyramid, after all, one euro has a very different value from what it has further down, where a single million represents an astronomical sum. Where democracy must coexist with inequality, however, a *vertical* dynamic also comes into play, as large sections of the electorate tend to claim privileges already enjoyed by the elites. This, in turn, compels the latter to renew their exclusivity by seeking goods and services to which others do not yet have access. If today even the popular classes can spend their holidays in Palma de Mallorca, the elites opt for the Seychelles.

This analysis shows that a large share of economic growth is directed not towards the satisfaction of basic needs or the reduction of poverty, but towards a competition for status involving not only individuals and social classes but also corporations, cities, and states. At the same time, growing consumption functions as an artificial stabiliser of an otherwise unstable system. Although it is primarily the elites who benefit from this system, and although

their ecological footprint is far greater (Oxfam, 2020), it also renders less affluent social groups complicit in its reproduction. Every Paternoster effect implies that “while some rise, others descend, and it is precisely this dynamic that contributes to making the rich richer and the poor more numerous” across the world (Butterwegge, 2020, p. 110). Although social inequality entails a relationship in which the privileges of some and the disadvantages of others are mutually constitutive, the two spheres remain separated even within the same city, as if rich and poor lived on different planets. Social inequality thus translates into visible and invisible boundaries which, both within and beyond the system, operate as what the sociologist Steffen Mau (2021) calls “sorting machines” (*Sortiermaschinen*): while the energy, raw materials, “human resources”, capital, and commodities required for economic growth and consumerism are internalised, the associated costs (hazardous waste, poverty, conflicts, risks, and so forth) are externalised. Borders are expected to block the feared “invasion of foreigners” from the Global South while simultaneously allowing privileged groups to travel and spend their holidays wherever they wish. Like colonialism, mass tourism also performs a function of social compensation (cf. Habinger, 2021). If colonial expansion for centuries offered the lower classes opportunities to seek their fortune elsewhere, tourism today enables even the popular classes to temporarily experience a “life of kings” elsewhere, thereby making subordination and feelings of powerlessness at home more bearable.

4. A Question of Coexistence

How is peaceful coexistence amid diversity on a finite planet possible? This is one of the central questions of the twenty-first century. The polycrisis shows that the answers on which modern society has been built are flawed. Although it continually re-legitimises itself through the opposition between civilisation and barbarism, modernity retains a deeply expansionist and imperial logic. If the Great Transformation described by Polanyi has led to a permanent war among human beings and against nature, a sustainable transformation requires a change from within the system: self-limitation instead of growth, cooperation instead of competition, redistribution instead of inequality, and bridges instead of walls.

A culture that has shaped our society for decades, if not centuries, cannot be transformed overnight. A first step, however, is to reflect critically on the kind of living together that individuals are taught every day through schools, universities, the mass media, and the internet. How can a “community of values” accept propaganda and advertising as legitimate instruments of the “mental programming” of the masses? Equally important is recognising that the cognitive map of a high culture (*Hochkultur*) does not coincide with the territory it represents. Continuing to view the world from above instead generates misperceptions and decisions that may prove catastrophic. Sustainable transformation must therefore be conceived as a process of both collective and individual learning, in which social change (*sociogenesis*) is accompanied by inner change (*psychogenesis*) (Elias, 2012). Such learning cannot take place in classrooms alone; it also requires spaces for experimentation and collective learning in real-world settings (*living labs*). Initiatives such as the “Day of the Good Life” (*Tag des guten Lebens*) have shown in Cologne how peaceful coexistence amid diversity can be learned through shared experiences within neighbourhoods, temporarily transforming streets, schools, theatres, churches, courtyards, and parks into collectively self-governed commons. Within these spaces, only a sharing economy is permitted, while commercial activities are suspended (Brocchi, 2017).

The psychologist Paul Watzlawick (2011) showed that the way human beings relate to content depends on the quality of their relationships. Anyone seeking to address either the climate crisis or the crisis of democracy must therefore first examine the state of social relations within society, and the ways in which consumerism affects them. While the privatisation of infrastructures and the commodification of urban spaces have contributed to increasing social entropy, social and creative capital constitute some of the most important resources for a sustainable transformation. The first step in overcoming the sense of powerlessness is therefore sharing. Through new alliances – for example between social movements, trade unions, universities, and neighbourhoods – inclusive agoras can be created in which citizens act as agents rather than consumers of politics, defining themselves the government programme to be implemented at the local level, including through forms of cooperation between citizens and municipal institutions (*citizen-public partnerships*). If we do not wish to continue living at the expense of others, however, we must broaden the democratic agora by giving voice to those others: the Global South, future generations, and nature. Through such dialogue, systems can reflect upon themselves by viewing themselves from the perspective of their own environment. Twinning arrangements and exchanges between affluent and disadvantaged neighbourhoods can likewise contribute to a change of perspective. The visible and invisible walls that protect us are at the same time the walls that keep us imprisoned. This is why broadening our horizons may also help us emancipate ourselves from a “well-having” that is not necessarily a “well-being” (Latouche, 2014b).

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Notes

Note 1. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) publishes an annual ranking of military expenditure by country. In 2022, for example, US military spending exceeded the combined military expenditure of the ten countries immediately below it in the ranking (<https://www.sipri.org>).

Note 2. In a 1992 essay, the political scientist Francis Fukuyama described capitalism as the “end of history”.

Note 3. For example, in the City of Cologne, municipal services are provided through so-called Kundenzentren (“customer centres”): <https://www.stadt-koeln.de/service/kundenzentren/index.html> (accessed 20 September 2026).

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