
FROM PROTESTANT ETHIC TO HEDONISTIC EXPERIENTIAL ETHICS

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Abstract

Hedonism is a value orientation in life which is often incorrectly and stereotypically equated with modern consumerism, individualistic and narcissistic behaviour patterns, and a relaxed attitude to life. The tradition of Protestant ethics reinforces the belief that hedonistic life activities are in direct contradiction to the values of work and performance. In affluent consumer societies, the original, religiously rooted relationship between work and simultaneous rigid rejection of the hedonistic world full of experiences and entertainment is transformed due to the influence of experiential economy and emergence of late modernist lifestyles. Work becomes an integral part of the value world of hedonism. Exemplified by three various types of non-ascetic lifestyles - predatory hedonism, bourgeois-bohemianism and alternative hedonism - the objective of this study is to support the hypothesis that traditional elements of Protestant ethics, namely relation to work, performance and success, are reflected in various reconstructed forms in late modernity manifestations of hedonistic-oriented lifestyles. In case of predator hedonism, the relationship to work and performance is primarily determined by the incentives of reaching material benefits as a prerequisite of sensual enjoyment of pleasures of life, impulsive spending and achieving consumer goals. Bourgeois bohemians also model the relationship to work and performance as a central life value, however, they don't see it as an instrument of attaining wealth, prestige, fame and fulfilling consumer goals, but they see it as a source of meaningful creative activity and self-fulfilment. Finally, in case of alternative hedonists, the relationship to work and performance is moderated by voluntarily living a modest life, reducing workload and stress, and rationalizing life with elements of a creative approach to life, aesthetics and spirituality.

Keywords: alternative hedonism, experiential economy, predatory hedonism, Protestant ethic, yuppie

1. Introduction

Ethic is traditionally part of philosophical and anthropological discourse. Ethical issues are integrated in a number of ontological and gnoseological theories of man and society. Ethical problems then form the core of practical philosophy, becoming the central category of exploring the ethical dimension of

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reality and the ethical aspects of life [1]. Ethic is not just a philosophical-anthropological discipline of a broader scope and significance, but also the theoretical basis of addressing many specific and practical research questions. Besides the fundamental ethical concepts of philosophical dimension of thinking [2], we for example identify attempts to examine the ethical aspects of tolerance in the conditions of liberalism and emancipation of individual freedoms [3], or reflections on the ethical principles of Science within the perspective of interesting analogies of the Natural sciences [4]. Some authors focus on ethics in engaged efforts to appeal to the promotion of the principles of voluntary humbleness and self-restraint in consumer-type affluent societies, seriously threatened by environmental threats, devastation of nature and reducing quality of life [5]. Ethical questions logically correspond also with problems of hypertrophying consumerism and programmatic promoting the principles of economic growth, supported by an intensive complex of the marketing and media industry. There is no doubt that the media production of commercial contents and advertising [6], specific with impulsiveness and accentuating the presence, sensual satisfying and emotionality, strengthens and develops hedonistic attitudes to life with the help of other media stimuli. *„Hedonistic character of media production has become a principle of creation and perception of media contents and messages, not only of entertainment genres. Recipients are amazed by the experience media production as it offers countless number of emotional stimuli and emotional states, such as emotion, joy, laughter, fear, hatred, horror etc.“* [7] The ethos of the consumerism hedonism does not bring into the lives of people just more of the expected happiness, peace and joy but, according to some authors, rather more anxiety, disappointment and feelings of isolation [8]. Hedonistic behaviour patterns based on the needs of continuous stimulation may in many cases of people's lives rather cause tendencies to regress the feelings of personal happiness and peace of mind [9].

Hedonistic life practices and the level of fulfilling them is substantially dependent on the extent and intensity of the participation of actors on the consumer culture markets, enabling to develop the motives of pleasure seeking, and validate even their sense as a source of value orientation. According to Schor [10], they are not idleness and relaxed attitude to life or ease and quiet pace of life that stand behind the hedonistic consumerism, but rather hard work focused on success, performance and adequate reward to be later in the experiential industry markets converted to hedonistic adventures and pleasures as a reward for overworking and lack of free time. While profitable activity, contingent on work and individual performance, has traditionally been legitimised in the spirit of the Weberian tradition by the inner-secular austerity of the puritans, asceticism, depriving the profit motives of ethical barriers, consumer culture and hedonistic ethos of hard work, has turned this legitimising of hard work and greediness over. In this newly formed existential conditions, work and earnings are not inconsistent with superficial consumerism, but have become rather a prerequisite. Hedonism, however, cannot be simply confused with consumerism. As we shall see, the background of the hedonistic values can

be observed in various forms of lifestyles and dynamics, from the more radical material (predatory) oriented forms to more moderate and modest forms of expression, intensified by the spiritual dimension of life, spirituality, as well as by work as the bearer of joy and delight.

The aim of this study is to demonstrate the relationship between work and hedonism as interrelated and coherent values, which is a fact that is reflected insufficiently in the scientific literature. At the same time, we rely on the foundations of the empirically proven Schwartz [11] value typology capturing the dynamics of value relations, in which hedonism is part of the area of values used to achieve and implement individual interests, where the categories of power, work performance, success, stimulation and independence occur all at once. We challenge the stereotypical and yet widely accepted thesis that the focus on work, performance and success represents qualities irreconcilable and opposing to the contents of the hedonistic values, inaccurately equated to or mistaken for idleness, passive entertainment, spending and a casually relaxed attitude to life. At the same time we are presenting a hypothesis here that performance and success do not have to depend solely on utilitarian and instrumental motivations (to earn to be able to spend lavishly), but can be anchored directly in the hedonistic value orientations as meaningful and longer lasting sources of pleasure and joy (work as enjoyment). We're trying to find argumentation to support the claim that the traditional elements of the Protestant ethic, specifically related to work, performance and success, reflect in variously reconstructed forms and specific models in late modern lifestyles. We are trying to prove that by presenting three different examples of non-ascetic lifestyles - predatory hedonism (yuppies), bourgeois bohemianism (bobos) and alternative hedonism (voluntarily humble) - which at the same time contain strong expressions of hedonistic values and revitalising characters of relation to work and individual performance in the spirit of the Protestant ethic.

2. The Protestant ethic and the cult of deferred pleasure

In the Weber's work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* [12] tradition of thought, the hedonistic life orientations are hardly compatible with the principles of modern professional ethic, the religious roots of which clearly lead to economic rationalisation of the entrepreneurs' lifestyle, which is simultaneously becoming an important prerequisite for the development and strengthening of the capitalist system model of the society. In other words, values are being shaped in the core of vocational ethics as a result of the effect of certain Protestant teachings, and those refer to the ascetic qualities of temperance, austerity, humility, moderation, thrift and especially to what has almost completely disappeared from the contemporary consumer society - and that is the willingness to postpone joy and pleasure to the future. These are the characteristics that, according to Weber, had direct influence on the development of the entrepreneurial spirit and high efficiency of economic activities. On the contrary, modern forms of consumer hedonism were clearly displaced out of the

principles of professional ethic and generally from the lifestyle of entrepreneurs as undesirable and forbidden in terms of human vices. From the point of view of the ascetic Protestantism, hedonism was essentially tabooed, equated to sin and called an act of degrading and barbarising the accepted social norms, formed and maintained by strictly religious teachings and religious atmosphere of the era.

The roots of attitudes to life and lifestyle of Protestants, reflecting in the particular interconnection of their own religiosity and professional ethic as an appropriate combination for the accumulation of capital, can be found right in the Calvin's doctrine of predestination. In there, the uncertainty of the fate plays a significant role. Fate is supposed to be (pre)determined by an unquestionable act of God's will and there is not much that man can change in its constellation, either by merit or by guilt. This situation of induced fatalism evokes in people dramatizing feelings of determination of the fate itself, leading believers to feelings of loneliness and devotion. And very hard and intense work, serving the glory of God, should be the way to overcome these pursuing 'shadows on soul'. Relent or even idle in work performance means to lose the path to salvation and sink into constricting doubts of one's own destiny. This attitude to life, that was originally practiced in monasteries, based on asceticism and hard work, gradually moved to and got anchored in the secular life and firmly embodied in the principles of everyday life in the form of increased self-control and self-discipline, strictly limiting the possibilities of wasting time by inefficient idleness. Hard work and asceticism were desirable manifestations of life, virtues, to which all of the life efforts had to be directed. There is no doubt that these were the virtues thanks to which entrepreneurs and traders were able to achieve not only the desired economic gains, but in striving for earnings by means of these virtues they legitimised their desire for profit and wealth.

Monitoring the economic profit, which required self-denial and hard work, was thus not normatively assessed as an act of amorality. Asceticism was simultaneously a function restricting consumer practice and wealth, that was supposed to be accumulated and rationally utilised for further future increases in volumes. Property was neither a source of lavish lifestyle, nor a source of pomp and admiration of others. Relationship to wealth and assets was primarily a relationship of responsibility and respect, which clearly reflected the religiously motivated virtues of synergistically acting asceticism and performance, thrift and greediness, orientation towards the future and temperance. While the values of performance and success stand behind greediness, accumulation of property and wealth, asceticism and the religiously defined principle of deferred consumption cult stand behind minimising the risks of temptation to invest those profits in the hedonistic pleasures of life.

3. From the deferred consumption joy cult to impulsive society of instant gratification

Weber showed that the Protestant ethic can resolve the contradiction between wealth and temptation to uncontrollably 'fritter' that wealth away in the

axes of the hedonistic merry-go-round of fun. The Protestant ethic and its links with the secular vocation meant anchoring of the self-discipline and asceticism in the structures of lifestyle and rationalised human activity and its results. According to Weber, religious teaching thus paradoxically contributed to the rationalisation of the society as a whole and allowed the development of capitalist entrepreneurship. Economic forces of capitalism focused on maintaining and enhancing the functioning of capitalism as a progressively global system however leave the principles of the Protestant ethic with the advent of the consumer-type society free from the roots from which they were born and further strengthen their essence in an environment where the traditional values of self-control and self-denial shifted due the enforcement of consumer culture as an important attribute of the late modernity society far to the values of hedonistic consumerism.

The contradiction between work, earnings and ascetically deferred reward for the performance explained by Weber, gains in the conditions of consumer society a totally new and totally opposite dimension. While in the Weber's concept the Protestant ethic served the origin of entrepreneurship, entrepreneurship and the accumulation of capital allowed the emergence of an affluent society, which later gives birth to the hedonistic ethos of consumerism and emotional consumption. Gradually, however, the global economic system got perfectly and tightly affiliated with the 'ethics of experiences', and their relationship may no longer be quite as free as the relationship between Protestantism and Capitalism analysed by Weber.

The concept of experiential economy of the authors Pine and Gilmore [13] clearly captures this trend. The motives of deferred consumption are rigorously expelled here as undesirable environmental practices and replaced with an irresistible adventurous atmosphere of the industry of entertainment (adventures), employing highly professionalised, independently working creative class [14], currently the key driving force behind the economic growth. Profits from work should be, according to the logic of experiential economy, urgently invested in entertainment and experiences, hedonistic pleasures and enjoyment that should compensate for the work efforts expended to raise funds, enabling to meet consumer desires. Experiential economy basically initiates, develops and deepens the system of 'quick profits and rewards' not only at the level of microenvironment of vital signs of radicalised forms of consumer hedonism, but also at the macro-levels of institutional structures. As Roberts claims, „*Government, the media, academia, and especially business – the very institutions that once helped to temper the individual pursuit of quick, self-serving rewards are themselves increasingly engaged in the same pursuit*” [15]. Experiential economy shifts the concentration of forces from production to consumption, from production to shopping, thereby significantly changing the socio-economic environment, especially in the sense that while the economic processes were traditionally governed by material criteria, the new ones are governed by immaterial rules of the emotional and sensory world of consumers.

The principles of experiential production applied within the consumer culture are shaping the environment of powerful pressures of competitiveness, efficiency, flexibility, performance and revenues, subordinated to short-term economic goals and rapid appreciation of investments. These principles gradually seep and settle in the social environment, and typically exhibit an increased hedonistic consumer activity, in which the structures of the momentary culture are being fixed as a platform for the development and confirmation of consumer behaviour pattern variations. In a way, this platform represents an attractive strategy in an environment of instability and uncertainty, where long-term plans and intentions lose their relevance. This may be partly the result of living in secular societies where the traditional religious belief loses its influence and is to some extent substituted and compensated with increased consumerism, in which false sources of certainties of life are often perceived. Perhaps that's why deferred consumption is not a very attractive behaviour model, since its focus going beyond the certain presence of moments refers to an uncertain future. Similarly, receiving long-term commitments and responsibilities can be perceived as an unpleasant life circumstance that contradicts the requirements of flexibility and significantly reduces the participation in the colourful world of changes and innovations of consumer opportunities.

Experiential economy strengthens and legitimises the ethic of experience as a hedonistic intensification of present moments and fleeting moving of volatile attention from one experience to another. The ethic of experiences leads to the worship of the instant gratification cult, where the '*now or never*' [16] rule applies. It is built on the premise of merging with the presence and simultaneous detachment from the prospects of the future, which should always retreat attractive incentives and impulses of present moments.

4. Ethic of experiences from the perspective of late modern lifestyles

Hedonistic values are reflected in different lifestyles, everyday practices and patterns of behaviour. At the same time, fulfilling these values cannot be simply equated to the hypertrophy of the predatory consumerism, idleness and ostentation, superficiality or trivialisation of human relations, narcissism, recklessness, degrading abilities of empathy or decreasing level of solidarity. Even so, *signum diabolicum*, allegedly lacking the interest in the problems of other people, the environment, security, respect for human rights and the exercise of justice, need not be necessarily seen behind the values of hedonism. At the same time, even the man's relationship to work firmly anchored in the Protestant Ethic does not have to go through erosion under the influence of hedonistic values, but rather look for yet another background in the strengthening of the importance of work and exploring its deeper meaning and significance. Work need not represent the only instrument for achieving resources necessary to certain participation in consumer culture and consumerism, but a stable support of one's identity, an attribute of one's ontological sense and a source of deeper and more permanent feelings of

happiness, joy, peace and contentment. The fact that work and work performance and results can also be an integrated part of hedonistic living practices that fill man with positive emotions and pleasure, and not only an instrument for achieving financial resources, which are then in a commercial environment of markets indirectly converted in experiences and various volatile and impulsive excitements, can be briefly shown on the lifestyles of predatory hedonists, bourgeois bohemians and alternative hedonists.

When the term Young Urban Professional (yuppie) [17] starts appearing in the American press in the early 1980s and later also in professional sociological publications, it is far from meaning just an attempt to capture a direction of lifestyle of one of the many subcultures of the American society, but a more important attitude to life with a deeper vision and orientation, shared across the American (and later European) population. This living manifestation is known as predatory hedonism since, as outline below, it fulfils a number of current parameters of the contemporary type radicalised consumer hedonism.

Predatory hedonists are characterised by a strong relationship to material values, seeking quick and successful professional career, guaranteeing - if possible - high income, prestige and power. They are therefore willing to sacrifice their free time, as well as reduce the efforts and time of family and partner relationships that are restrictive to the realisation of their own life scenarios where there is not too much space for empathy and reciprocity. Conversely, dominating are loneliness and the efforts to satisfy one's egoistically-narcissistic needs and selfish interests that are clearly contrary to tolerance and understanding, caring about the environment, as well as self-discipline and respect for social rules. Not only do they accept but actively seek fast pace of life, consumer opportunities and conspicuous consumption. „*Narcissist personalities of today's people remain immature, bound to 'hyper-narcissism' and 'hyper-consumerism'; moreover, 'hyper-consumerism' now involves all aspects of social life, exploiting the principles of human spirituality and emotional pleasures.*“ [18] Their typically high level of commitment, desire for success, career and guaranteed earnings, although correlating with the concept of work in terms of the Protestant ethic, completely leaves out the ascetic dimension to the treatment of profit, which transformed in the atmosphere of emotional consumerism experiential economy in a series of hedonistic adventures, debauchery and eventually indebtedness.

Bourgeois bohemians (Bobos) represent the non-ascetic lifestyle, rich in experience and, if possible, saturated with interesting and varied life content. According to Brooks, „*The Bobos define our age. They are the new establishment.*“ [19] They represent a certain hybridisation of materialistically oriented predatory hedonists (yuppies) and informally tolerant hippies, in other words, they are born in a synthesis of the American cultural mainstream of the seventies and the cultural revolt of the sixties. On the one hand, this late modern lifestyle reflects distinct ambitions in career paths, focus on job performance, determination, desire for success, recognition and other typical features of yuppies; on the other hand, reflected there are the characters of bohemianism,

relaxedness, temperance, moderation, tolerance, openness, empathy, interest in the others, relationship to intangible values and spirituality, that are contrarily typical for hippies. In the environment of bourgeois bohemians thus work commitment and preferences of working life get interconnected with the values of the quality of life, searching for life balance, harmony, peace and spiritual dimensions of existence. In their conception of life, work is not an instrument for achieving money, power, position and prestige; it becomes not only a mission and a way of self-realisation and self-satisfaction, but also entertainment, something that brings joy and meaningfulness to life. Having fun is to work, create something new, original, affirm one's authenticity and contribute to the welfare of others.

While the concept of bourgeois bohemians already has its background in the systemically compiled sociological concept of Brooks, the theory of alternative hedonism only comes to existence in the background of various philosophical and sociological studies, mapping different manifestations, characteristics and trends of this unique form of contemporary lifestyle [20]. Alternative hedonism can be attributed to the creation and developing of various culturally creative forms of life with distinct elements of voluntary humbleness. Self-restraint, preference of deferred pleasure, voluntary acceptance of some degree of discomfort in various life situations and attention for others and solidarity, resignation to a number of material assets or rejection of frivolous fun however, are not the expression of asceticism, but rather a way to minimise the annoying and unwanted consequences of hectic life, that are materially oriented and stressed by the consumer society. Alternative hedonists actively seek possibilities for slowing down the pace of life [21], making routine life practices more pleasant and maximising the feelings of well-being while minimising the costs in the form of money or free time investments. They enjoy privacy as well as close family, partner and friendly relationships; they enjoy physical activity, nature, leisure, often quite mundane and routine life situations. They behave ecologically and considerably not for reasons of enforcing external impersonal 'green ideologies', but simply because such behaviour brings them a feeling of inner satisfaction, meaningfulness and self-belief in contributing to a good thing. They promote the idea of a "*rich life with modest means*" [22].

The continuing prosperity model of consumer culture is increasingly based on collective willingness and readiness to spend and, on the contrary, the unwillingness to save and live in the mode of voluntary humbleness. Furthermore, also the application of the assumption that people will work more and harder and their attitude towards work will become more instrumental in nature. At the same time, they will devote a greater amount of time to financial earnings subsequently invested in products that will compensate and replace those goods and values to which people voluntarily and involuntarily waive in the benefit of time-consuming work. This is what alternative hedonism resists; it refuses to accept work only as an instrument for earning money; it refuses even the time spent at the expense of family, partner and personal life. Contrarily, work should be conducive to well-being, calm, harmonious life without stress.

Unlike bourgeois bohemians, alternative hedonists lack strong work commitment and a desire for greater earnings and, in the spirit of voluntary humbleness, prefer more leisure time at the expense of lower incomes, slower or voluntarily confined career growth and material comfort.

5. Conclusions

Hedonistic values cannot be stereotypically equated to the predatory consumerism of affluent societies operating on the principles of experiential economy. It is a set of variously applied life values and styles, referring to the traditions of hedonistic philosophy of Cynics, Epicureans and Stoics. From that tradition some post-modern lifestyles assume the elements of moderation and modesty that they meaningfully compose and combine in a complex of other life practices.

At first glance, hedonistic values may further comprise opposition values of labour, performance and success and subsequent asceticism, self-discipline and humility. Weber's concept of the Protestant ethic finds a differently strong response in late modern lifestyles of the predatory hedonists, bourgeois bohemians and alternative hedonists. In the first type of lifestyle (predatory hedonism) the emphasis on hard work, power and greediness remains, but instead of legitimisation of achieving profits and wealth through inner-secular austerity and the cult of deferred pleasure, that legitimisation becomes radically distorted in the opposite of the non-ascetic spending and sensual enjoyment of life. In the other case (bourgeois bohemianism) work and performance also appear as motivational goals of life, but not as instruments for achieving fame, power, status and wealth, but as forms of entertainment, self-fulfilment and inner satisfaction. Work in this concept is interpreted as a meaningful creative activity providing positive emotions of satisfaction. Thirdly, in the alternative hedonism lifestyle, the theme of work and work performance is weakened, does not necessarily have to represent the central category of life or a source of material wealth, but a contribution to intellectual refreshment, that in any case should not represent a barrier to personal and family life. The motive is a voluntarily humble life, reduction of work-related stress and systematic reduction of consumption, finding pleasure in the creative life of aesthetic experience, interpersonal relationships and spirituality.

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