

THE (IN)COMPATIBILITY OF THE ECOLOGICAL MODERNIZATION THEORY AND CONSUMER SOCIETY

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Abstract. *Ecological modernization theory is an approach that seeks to reconcile environmental conservation with economic development and technological progress. The theory suggests that environmental problems can be solved by adopting cleaner technologies, increasing resource efficiency and applying environmental regulations. One of the key aspects of ecological modernization is the belief that economic growth and environmental protection can go hand in hand. Proponents argue that through technological progress and the development of environmentally friendly industries, societies can achieve both economic prosperity and environmental sustainability. Some of the biggest weaknesses of the theory are insufficient consideration of consumption and the growing consumerism of today's consumer society, as well as the lack of perspective for developing countries that have experienced significant industrial development in the last two decades.*

Key words: *ecology, environment, ecological modernization theory, consumer society.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper, the ecological modernization theory will be analyzed in the context of the consumer society with the aim of trying to answer the question whether the ecological modernization theory offers possible answers in the modern hyper consumer society.

Sociology got involved relatively late in the research on topics from the field of ecology, therefore natural and technical sciences dealt with environmental topics far more. Ecological research in sociology emerged as a special field of study in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when sociologists began to recognize the importance of studying the interaction between society and the environment, primarily in the United States of America, where the largest number of sociologists who work in this field are still concentrated today (Buttel 2003). Although environmental research in sociology began to gain importance in the late

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1960s and early 1970s, it is important to note that the study of human-environment interactions and ecological perspectives can be traced back to earlier sociological works, such as those of early social theorists such as Emile Durkheim (Durkheim 1972) and Max Weber (Weber 1968), who investigated the relationships between society, culture and the environment.

The environmental movement of the 1960s, which drew attention to issues such as pollution, resource depletion, and environmental degradation, played a significant role in shaping the emergence of environmental research in sociology. The movement raised awareness of the environmental consequences of industrialization and encouraged scientists to examine the social dimensions of environmental problems. Since its inception, environmental research in sociology has continued to develop and expand, addressing a wide range of topics related to environmental sustainability, social justice, urbanization, and global environmental challenges. Environmental sociology recognizes that society and the environment are interconnected and that it is necessary to study them as integrated systems within which complex interactions between social, cultural, economic and ecological factors operate. Sociologists engaged in environmental research often tried to answer the question of the causes of environmental degradation (Buttel 2003).

Environmental research in sociology also deals with global environmental challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution and resource depletion. They examine the social causes and consequences of these challenges, including the role of economic systems, consumption patterns, and political structures in shaping environmental outcomes and other environmental issues.

Overall, ecological research in sociology seeks to understand the social dimensions of environmental issues and their implications for the well-being of human society, as well as issues of long-term sustainability of modern civilization, emphasizing the need for interdisciplinary and holistic study and understanding of the complex relationships between society and the environment.

2. ECOLOGICAL MODERNIZATION THEORY

The theory of ecological modernization arose in the sociology of the 1980s, advocating that it is beneficial for the economy and industry to develop and modernize within ecological frameworks. The theory was put forward by a group of scientists at the Research Center for Social Sciences in Berlin, including Joseph Huber (Huber 1985, 2000). During the early phase, works and research mentioning the theory of ecological modernization were written in the German language. The theory continued to develop, and the first papers were published in English, with the participation of numerous authors from Western Europe, among whom the most famous are Arthur Moll and Gert Spaargaren, and then Maarten Hajer (Hajer 1995; Spaargaren and Mol 1992) who advocated for the ecological adjustment of economic growth and industrial development for mutual benefit, promoting the use of renewable energy sources, clean technologies and sustainable supply chain management. "Like the concept of sustainable development, ecological modernization indicates the possibility of overcoming the environmental crisis without leaving the path of modernization", (Spaargaren and Mol 1992, 334). The ecological modernization theory is certainly the most well-known theory in this area of sociology, and it has been the subject of analysis for years, both from a theoretical point of view by numerous sociologists and

researchers, it has also found wide political support, it has been considered from an economic point of view and practically applied in numerous countries, in different economic branches. “Ecological modernization frames environmental problems in such a way that they can be solved politically, economically and technologically in the context of existing institutions and power structures and continued economic growth”, (Gibbs 2017, 1). In this way, ecological modernization does not create a conflict with business, like many other ecological approaches, but on the contrary, by emphasizing the role of modernization, it even opens up possibilities for completely new markets and new production.

In theoretical and scientific terms, the theory of ecological modernization is connected to the theory of social change, that is, it derives from the theory of modernization, while in practical terms it owes its popularity to the fact that it is based on the existing social and economic order (Čikić 2012).

The theory of ecological modernization is far from the radical demands inherent in many less prominent theories in the field of environmentalism and advocates the concept of gradual changes. These gradual changes relate to various segments of society, such as macroeconomic changes, environmental protection policies, and to a certain extent state interventionism, but primarily environmental standards in production based on modern scientific and technological achievements. Ecological modernization should take place as a necessary, but gradual process of synchronized transformations in various spheres, from political and economic to cultural and social, which is the greatest weakness of the theory (Čikić 2012).

In contrast to numerous strong opponents of industrialization in developed countries, the ecological modernization theory offered a completely different perspective that focuses on industrial and technological development, practically super industrialization, as a way out of the ecological crisis. “The true meaning of this “ecosocial reorientation“ in practice means changing the assumptions of European political elites when creating strategies to control pollution of nature”, (Nadić 2009, 260). Political elites are expected to see environmental spending as an investment in the future, not as a financial expense. “Proposing sustainable development as intergenerational solidarity unites healthy selfishness and systematic thinking with an evolutionary perspective”, (Castells 2002, 132).

From all of the above, we see that ecological modernization is an optimistic theory that does not see today's ecological risks as insurmountable obstacles, but rather relies primarily on modern technologies, scientific development, and to a certain extent, state intervention, but primarily in terms of additional environmental standards for industry.

Thanks to its pragmatic and reconciling approach with economics, the ecological modernization theory has the epithet of a mainstream approach that allows for practical application both through global policies and strategies, and through direct regulations in certain areas of industry.

2.1. The practical application of ecological modernization theory

Even when shaping the ecological modernization theory, in the early stages it was conceived that the concept would be applicable on two levels, the first concept is of a theoretical character, while the second is practical and foresees the use of ecological modernization as a political program (Spaargaren and Mol 1992).

When it comes to practical application, ecological and environmental movements have been diverse in their methods and goals since their beginnings, from mass ones such as

Greenpeace, which is known for its non-violent methods, through ecofeminism, to radical movements which resort to violent measures in the fight for nature and strive for a complete return to the wild. Castells points out that, despite the “cacophony of environmental movements” and different tactics, they nevertheless have a sufficient amount of commonality, and that there is “a consistent ecological path that connects the different political orientations and social origins within the movement and that provides a framework from which different themes emerge at different times and with different goals” (Castells 2002, 129). What is indisputable is that environmental movements have not only survived in time, but have managed to impose themselves as some of the leading political ideologies of today, and some influential political parties in Europe have received the sign of “greens”.

Some ecological movements share the same approach as ecological modernization theory believing that economic growth can be reconciled with environmental conservation including the most prominent environmental movement that is the United Nations Sustainable Development Agenda¹. Sustainable Development Agenda defines sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”². We see that this basic goal of the agenda shares a dose of optimism with the theory of ecological modernization, but at the same time we can rightly ask ourselves whether this goal has already become unattainable in this generation, let alone in future generations. Photos and footage of polluted oceans, rivers and land tell a different story that we have already depleted this world of energy sources, clean air and clean water and have irreversibly affected climate change on the planet.

When it comes to Greenpeace, it advocates for clean technologies, renewable energy, and eco-friendly practices, which aligns with the ecological modernization theory’s emphasis on technology as a tool for sustainability, but on the other hand Greenpeace is very critical about some modern technological solutions, such as nuclear power, and as well about growing consumption and capitalism. More radical movements and theories are even further removed from the context of ecological modernization theory and its sustainable narrative, but at the same time are far less influential. One of the well-known radical movements is Earth First!³ that was founded in 1980 and promoted that all life forms are equal, including humankind which represents the greatest threat to the planet through overpopulation, industrialization, excessive consumption, imperialism etc. Among the known radical movements and approaches we can also mention Deep Ecology that criticized mainstream ecology movements as “shallow ecology” that is limited by wanting to change the consequences and not the source of the environmental issues and which at the same time advocates for the radical change in human life (Naess 1973). There are many other radical ecological movements that in most cases share the core idea of necessity of radical changes in the modern way of life and that very idea is what makes them marginal in modern society that is not open for radical changes. Nevertheless, environmental issues are a global concern for more and more people and it needed to be addressed in a more or less radical approach.

The explanation of the success of the environmental agenda and numerous environmental movements, as well as their political influence in the modern world, can be linked to the fact that environmental risks are global and not class-based, as Ulrich Beck wrote about in the mid-80s. “Reduced to one formula: misery is hierarchical, smog is democratic. By expanding

¹ <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n15/291/89/pdf/n1529189.pdf>

² <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/development-agenda/>

³ <https://www.environmentandsociety.org/exhibitions/radical-environmentalisms-print-history/introducing-earth-first>

the risks of modernization - by harming nature, health, nutrition, etc. social differences and boundaries are relativized”, (Beck 2001, 54). The fear of managing new technologies is also shown by Daniel Bell, so writing about the post-industrial society, he expresses the hope that a more efficient monitoring of nuclear power plants is possible, which would enable the prevention of nuclear disasters (Bell in Ritzer 2009).

However, even in the case of global environmental risks, the burden of the risk is shifted to the greatest extent possible on less developed countries that, as a rule, exploit raw materials more and have worse legislation in environmental protection. There is also the issue of disposal of dangerous types of waste, such as medical and radioactive waste, which developed countries do not want to dispose on their own territory, but are looking for a place for it in other countries.⁴ Developed countries have been exporting the riskiest and dirtiest industries to Third World countries for a long time, not only because of environmental risks, but also because of incomparably cheaper labor costs and generally lower production costs.

“Economically favourable conditions of production, freed from the restraints of legitimacy, attract industrial concerns like a magnet and bind them to the particular interests of countries in overcoming material poverty and gaining national autonomy in one, in the true sense of the word, explosive mixture: The devil of hunger fights with the demon of risk multiplication” (Beck 2001).

It is not surprising that the ecological modernization theory found such approval in the most influential political circles, primarily in the developed Western countries, because it not only explicitly states that “the focus is not directed against capitalism and economic growth” (Spaargaren and Mol 1992), but many have understood that it practically offers a capitalist “heaven on earth” – ecological sustainability with production growth or at least not insisting on reducing the volume of production.⁵ Of course, the question arises whether such a thing is possible, if it is taken into account that natural resources are generally not unlimited, regardless of how sophisticated and technologically perfected the production process is. “While ecological modernization may appear to offer hope for those committed to stronger environmental protection measures, critics have argued that ecological modernization can equally serve as a cover for business-as-usual with a slight green tinge or ‘green wash’. In this sense, the term could serve to legitimise the continued destruction of the environment and foreground the industrial and technocratic discourses of modernity over more critical ecological ones”, (Gibbs 2017: 2). As we can often see on social media, the apocalyptic scenario looks like we will become the first generation of humankind to jeopardize our own survival for the sake of economic growth.

2.2. Critics of ecological modernization theory

The ecological modernization theory, as the most prominent sociological theory in this field, has caused numerous reactions from the scientific public, very different and sometimes contradictory, from supportive to very critical, although most of the criticism is somewhere in the middle (Fisher and Freudenburg 2001). Interest in the theory of

⁴ The case of Trgovska Gora in Croatia, where radioactive waste from the Slovenian nuclear power plant in Krško is intended to be disposed, is certainly the best known to the domestic public. Trgovska Gora is in the immediate vicinity of the border with Bosnia and Herzegovina, and it primarily threatens the municipalities in the Una river basin.

⁵ Although Mol and Spaargaren (2012) argue that the common assumption that ecological modernization requires more production to get out of the ecological crisis is wrong.

ecological modernism has not declined for almost three decades, as evidenced by the large number of research and studies dealing with it, numerous authors, and a significant number of citations in scientific journals (Julkovski et al. 2021).

One of the biggest confirmations of the importance of the ecological modernization theory is the fact that it was analyzed in detail by one of the greatest sociologists nowadays, Anthony Giddens, in his capital work "The Third Way", where he concludes that the assumptions of the theory are simply "too good to be true" (Giddens 1999). Giddens revisits the theory (although not in such detail) later in the work "The Politics of Climate Change" (Giddens 2013b) providing support for the basic postulates of ecological modernization, but stressing that things will not be that simple, and that there are numerous trade-offs that will have to be reached. Considering that Giddens metaphorically calls modernity Moloch (Juggernaut), a force that destroys everything before it, it is understandable that he shows a degree of skepticism towards a theory that is too optimistic (Giddens 2013a). The ecological modernization theory predicts with too much certainty management during modernization, which in modern society is increasingly complex and implies too large a number of factors and participants for it to be fully managed. Giddens also draws attention to the phenomenon he calls distancing, because the different components of modernity are increasingly distant both in space and time, so something that is the result of human activities in the past or present can have a huge impact on the future, for example the accumulation of radioactive waste and genetic research (Giddens 2013a).

The harshest critics, often starting from a neo-Marxist perspective, called ecological modernization "sustainable capitalism" (O'Connor 1994), pointing out that it was doomed (O'Connor 1994; Pellow, Schnaiberg, and Weinberg 2000). Slightly milder criticism challenged the theoretical setting (Buttel 2000; Blühdorn 2000), the lack of focus on the issue of consumption (Carolan 2004), while on the other hand, the theory was praised as innovative and grounded (Christoff 1996; O'Neill 2018; Rinkevicius 2000a; 2000b).

The above-mentioned criticisms were considered by the most famous advocates of the theory of ecological modernization today, Mol and Sparharen, who themselves admitted that the original version of the theory had its shortcomings, and that there is certainly room for its improvement (Mol 2010; 2002; 2003; Spaargaren 2000a; 2000b; Spaargaren and Van Vliet 2000).

A criticism that can also be directed at the ecological modernization theory is the lack of understanding for underdeveloped and developing countries. Namely, the ecological modernization theory originated in the countries of Western Europe and is largely determined by the discourse of neoliberal capitalism and developed societies, and although it sees nature as a general, global good, it has no understanding for societies that are at a lower level of development and still do not have developed sophisticated environmental protection technologies. The uncritical exportation of ideas from universalist theories like Ecological Modernization from developed to developing countries neglects the context-specificity of social-ecological dynamics and can be dangerously misleading in the search for sustainability (Mastrangelo and Aguiar 2019). Practically, one gets the impression that the ecological modernization theory favors only developed societies that during the early stages of their development did not take into account ecology but only economic growth, and the theory somehow overlooks the historical contribution of developed countries to the destruction of the environment, not taking into account the global distribution of the impact on the environment. Those developed countries have now reached a level of development where they can invest in clean technologies and environmental protection, but they set the same conditions globally for

all countries, thus limiting the development opportunities of underdeveloped and developing countries. Even in developed societies, it can be argued whether these changes are only “cosmetic” in nature, while in underdeveloped and developing societies there is an additional dilemma of priorities and the necessary capacities for ecological modernization (Čikić 2012). Therefore, developing countries may feel that the burden of achieving sustainability should be shared more fairly and that the focus should not be solely on their own environmental performance.

“The question isn’t only how environmental threats can be contained, but the effects of the economic development of the poorer countries, supposing it occurs. Ecological modernization, as currently understood, does not provide strategies for the transition from an agrarian to an industrial economy”, (Giddens 1999, 75).

Considering that developing countries often face numerous problems related to poverty, inequality and basic needs, it is clear that these primary needs can take priority over environmental issues. Emphasis on technological solutions and market mechanisms proposed by ecological modernization may not adequately respond to these fundamental development challenges for the above reasons. Cohen (Cohen 1997) believes that Japan is the only country that has substantially successfully applied ecological modernization, followed by Scandinavian countries with somewhat more modest results, while other developed countries face numerous challenges.

On the other hand, advocates of ecological modernization argue that the principles of sustainability and technological innovation are universally relevant, suggesting that adapting the theory to the specific context of developing societies can help solve environmental challenges while simultaneously promoting development and poverty alleviation. Although ecological modernization theorists do acknowledge that additional research is required for applying this approach in different cultural, political and economic circumstance, that is “yet to firmly establish its utility beyond developed economies” (Glynn, Cadman, and Maraseni 2017).

It is important to recognize the diversity of developing countries, as well as underdeveloped countries, and their unique circumstances. Solutions to achieve sustainability must take into account the local conditions, cultural values and the socioeconomic context of each country. In this sense, a one-size-fits-all approach, whether focused on the West or any other region, cannot have comprehensive effects. When we talk about the environmental impact, although the effects are global and all countries contribute to that impact, it is still dominantly associated with industrialized countries that are responsible for a large percentage of the total impact on natural resources (Durning 1992). For example, according to the World Bank, data on electricity consumption per capita unequivocally show that consumption is by far the highest in rich and developed countries.⁶

The question of the applicability of the ecological modernization theory to developing societies depends on the specific context, the inclusiveness of its application and the recognition of different perspectives and priorities. A more comprehensive approach that integrates social, economic and environmental dimensions is needed to address the complex challenges of sustainable development in both developed and developing societies.

The most significant and pressing critiques of the theory of ecological modernization lies in its core “green capitalist” framework, which falls short of addressing the critical question of our time—the survival of planet Earth as we know it—in a manner that is both timely and effective. “Though “green capitalist” approaches within environmental sociology

⁶ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/EG.USE.ELEC.KH.PC>

may provide an easy path to grants and promotions, nothing less than the fate of our planet depends on environmental sociology abandoning “green capitalist” hollow ecologies, and meeting its promise as a critical and effective discipline”, (Ewing 2017, 144).

3. CONSUMER SOCIETY

We call a consumer society a society based on the consumption of goods and services, as well as the use of services. “Consumerism, in the broadest sense, is a term that denotes the occurrence of excessive and objectively unnecessary consumption and describes the attitude that the happiness of individuals (consumers) depends on the consumption (consumption) of goods and services, i.e. the possession of material goods”, (Trandafilovic, Radonjic, and Filipovic 2015, 80). The consumer society is characterized by the offer and consumption of goods and services that greatly exceed the basic needs of the individual, but are focused on the continuous development of those needs. “The more one spends, the more one wants to spend: the period of abundance is inseparable from the endless expansion of the sphere of desired pleasures and the inability to resorb consumer appetites because every satisfaction of a need is immediately followed by new demands” (Lipovetsky 2008).

With the emergence of mass media, the consumer society is increasingly expanding its influence on a growing number of people, new consumers, because the media continuously promote an idealized image of happy, beautiful and successful people who own certain goods or use a certain service. In this way, the media establish a paradigm of a desirable lifestyle, dictate fashion and other trends. Baudrillard (1998) points out that “affluence is, in effect, merely the accumulation of signs of happiness”. Thus, possession has long since passed from the domain of satisfying real needs to the domain of achieving social status, and later the focus shifts from social status to individualism and hedonism, achieving the ideal of happiness, although the role of property as a status symbol will always remain present. “In the mid-60s of the XX century, the strategy of large multinational companies became: not to produce more to satisfy the needs of consumers (customers), but to produce the needs themselves and their necessity”, (Trandafilovic, Radonjic, and Filipovic 2015).

The consumer society does not stop only at the creation of needs, but is manifested in man’s constant search for something that will be better and that will make him happier. “Sociologically - in the face of the endless, naive confusion at the unstoppable advance and boundless renewal of needs, which is in fact irreconcilable with the rationalist theory that a satisfied need creates a state of equilibrium and the resolution of tensions – we may advance the hypothesis that, if one admits that need is never so much the need for a particular object as the “need” for difference (the desire for the social meaning), then it will be clear that there can never be any achieved satisfaction, and therefore any definition of need” (Baudrillard 1998).

Practically, in possession, the sky is the limit, what we can rely on with certainty is that man’s needs are inexhaustible and that completely new ones are constantly appearing that until yesterday could not even be guessed at. Lipovetsky emphasizes how “consumer societies are connected to a system of endless stimulation of needs that deepens disappointment and frustration all the more if calls for happiness at hand resonate more” (Lipovetsky 2008).

Chaney (2003) believes that one of the key factors in the emergence of consumer society is the process of commercialization of free time. “Leisure industries play an extremely important role in all spheres of lifestyles, not only because they fill a large part

of consumers' free time but also because they employ a huge number of people in charge of the production and presentation of products, and require huge investments to maintain their own market", (Chaney 2003, 34). Modern man in developed societies feels an increasing pressure to "live life to the fullest" and to make the most of his free time, to travel to exotic destinations, eat in exotic restaurants, follow the world of fashion, music, film and in general constantly experience new experiences.

Lipovetsky (2008) writes that three cycles are observed in mass production; the first that begins with the industrial revolution in the second half of the 19th century; the second that begins in the middle of the 20th century, which is associated with the emergence of the society of mass consumption; and the third, which began in the 70s and is focused on consumer individualism.

It is interesting that in the 1990s, ideas began to appear that modern society would shift the focus of interest from material well-being to spiritual, as well as that the development of modern information technologies would mark the end of the consumer society, linking it to capitalist consumerism. We are witnessing that this not only did not happen, but on the contrary, the consumer society has grown into a hyper-consumer society that buys more than ever, but a certain paradigm shift has occurred, namely the needs of consumers have become more sophisticated. "The emerging new society functions towards hyper-consumption, not under-consumption", (Lipovetsky 2008, 14). The modern consumer is interested in many issues that were not a matter of primary consumer interest in the 20th century, such as health, vitality, spirituality, ecology and the like. For example, it is often written that in terms of consumption, the beginning of the 21st century will be marked by nutritional supplements, because a huge market has emerged whose primary interest is maintaining health, vitality and, consequently, a longer and more active life. There is an increasing number of consumers of specific products in accordance with certain lifestyles, such as vegetarian, vegan or gluten-free diets, so the supply, but also the demand, of the so-called "healthy food" is greater than ever. The creation of consumer needs should no longer be limited to the rational function of the product or service, but should be extended to the emotional and unconscious part of the consumer's personality.

"Unlike traditional marketing, which emphasized rational arguments and the functional dimension of the product, many brands now play the card of emotions and feelings, "roots" and nostalgia (retro marketing). Others emphasize myths or luddism. Some try to take care of civil, environmental or animal rights issues", (Lipovetsky 2008, 27).

2.3. Consumer society and the ecological modernization theory

Even without scientific research, it is obvious that the modern world is exposed to numerous ecological risks. In the last hundred years, numerous animal and plant species have become extinct, and today, on the threshold of 2025, ecological risks have become even more complex and increased compared to the time when the theory of ecological modernization was created. All living beings on planet Earth are exposed to ecological risks, including humankind. "Dominant approaches to these problems within environmental sociology often fall within one of two varieties—either "green capitalist" approaches or those of critical environmental sociology", (Ewing 2017, 127). Taking into consideration all of the above mentioned, it is clear that ecological modernization definitely belongs to the "green capitalist" spectrum. Given that capitalism is embedded in consumption and the constant

encouragement of demand growth, it is expected that the greatest shortcomings of the “green capitalist” approach will be present particularly in this area.

What is noticeable is that the ecological modernization theory, in its early phase, focused primarily on production, and only in later stages it begins to include consumption patterns, as well as societies outside Europe, in its consideration, but the consumption and its role in industrial and economic development still remains in the background. “The central issue in environmental policy is the restructuring of production-consumption cycles, to be accomplished through the use of new, sophisticated, clean technologies”, (Spaargaren and Mol 1992: 340). There are numerous authors who noticed this early lack of focus on consumption in the theory of ecological modernization (Durning 1992; Princen, Maniates, and Conca 2002; York and Rosa 2003; York, Rosa, and Dietz 2010; Carolan 2004). Carolan (2004) even believes that the ecological modernization theory does not deal with excessive consumption at all, but exclusively with issues of production.

The lack of focus on the question of consumption was also noticed by the authors who today are the biggest proponents of the theory of ecological modernization, and a series of works were subsequently published that try to deepen the connection between the ecological modernization theory and today's consumer society (Spaargaren and Van Vliet 2000; Spaargaren 2000a; 2000b) focuses on the issue of “domestic consumption” by analyzing research conducted in Great Britain, Sweden and the Netherlands on the topic of consumption habits when it comes to water (including sewage) and electricity supply.

Although research on the global consumer society is far more demanding, when it comes to the effect of the consumer society on environmental issues, the question arises whether global conclusions can be drawn based on consumer behavior from three European countries without taking into account the habits of a huge consumer population in Asia, Africa, North and South America, who also have significantly different cultural perspectives than the average consumer from developed European countries.

Spaargaren (2000) generally, like the ecological modernization theory itself, relies too much on the good judgment of consumers, who will choose environmentally sustainable products and services themselves. “If used as an input to a political debate on sustainable consumption under the condition of reflexive modernity, this search for new answers will perhaps inspire lots of citizen-consumers to actively partake in that exercise”, (Spaargaren 2000, 332). Carolan also considers that in these later studies “the role of the consumer is addressed, while consumption itself—in terms of quantity, hidden commodity chains, and the social implications of those chains—remains largely on the margins of analysis” (Carolan 2004, 256).

What is encouraging is that in a hyper-consumer society, a completely new layer of environmentally conscious consumers is emerging who care about how the product or service they use affects the environment. Lipovetsky calls these consumers “alter consumers”. “Studies show that 15 to 20% of consumers can be considered alter consumers who opt for ethical products, refuse to identify with brands, buy organic food products, question the ecological effects of products: so many behaviors that testify to the effort to be a “responsible” participant rather but a passive victim of the market”, (Lipovetsky 2008, 215). However, with all that, he points out that for the time being, no alternative to the hyper-consumer society is visible on the horizon for the development of human society. Consumer culture is deeply rooted in the needs of man, and not only modern man, to find his purpose, his identity and realize the need to belong, so it is not rational to expect people to give up the consumer lifestyle on their own. However, the question arises as to whether we as a global society

have approached the moment when something will have to be done, bearing in mind that the human population has never been higher, consequently consumption has never been higher, and at the same time natural resources have never been lower. “We are presently at the point where the customary logic that upholds prevailing routines is beginning to break down due to demographic aging, wage stagnation, infusion of new lifestyle priorities, political paralysis, and constrained resources availability (most notably atmospheric sinks in which to dispose of greenhouse gases, but also soil fertility, biodiversity and toxic loading)”, (Cohen 2017, 133).

For several decades, one of the most prevalent concepts of ecological sustainability has been the transition from fossil fuels to the so-called renewable energy sources; however, the world still has not found an adequate alternative to fossil fuels that could support the survival of the consumer society (Trainer 2007). Undoubted confirmation of this position was given by the fossil fuel price crisis on the world market and its impact on the global economy, which arose as a result of the war conflicts in Ukraine in 2022. Although we still have not found an adequate replacement for fossil fuels, the answer will have to come soon, because fossil fuels are perhaps the best example of a resource that is constantly being consumed, is not renewable, and took millions of years to form. Millions of years that we no longer have at our disposal. “Manufacturers treat raw materials and natural resources as an unending or self-replenishing stockpile to be plundered and transformed into commodities, rendered vehicles for capital accumulation” (Meier 2022, 10).

What stands as one of humanity's greatest disappointments is our reckless consumption of non-renewable resources. Not only do we deplete these essential reserves, but we often destroy them outright. This issue is especially glaring in food production, where millions of tons of food go to waste each year, ending up in landfills unused and squandered. Numerous research show that from 12 up to 25% of food in households in USA, UK, Sweden and Japan ends up in waste (Smart 2010). While this phenomenon is most evident with food, it extends beyond just what we eat; we also produce, purchase, and discard items such as clothes, shoes, books, newspapers, and more.

The extent to which society has prioritized daily comfort and convenience over long-term sustainability is starkly illustrated by the plastic pollution crisis. In just over half a century, our reliance on plastic has led to staggering levels of waste, much of which has persisted in the environment for centuries. “More than 200 billion pounds of plastic is produced worldwide each year and of that ‘about 10 percent ends up in the ocean’”, (Smart 2010, 171). The long-term effects of this pollution—on human health, animal well-being, and the environment—remain largely unknown. However, what we do know is alarming: microplastics are already infiltrating our food systems, water supplies, and even the air we breathe. The full impact of this crisis may not become apparent until future generations face its consequences. “There is an ‘island’ of plastic waste floating in an area of the north-eastern Pacific, variously estimated to be twice the size of Texas or France and to contain an estimated six million tons of material”, (Smart 2010, 171). In pursuit of convenience, such as the ease of packaging with plastic, we have endangered the well-being of countless generations to come. This trade-off-short-term comfort for long-term harm – underscores the urgent need to rethink our relationship with disposable materials and adopt more sustainable practices.

We should not get the wrong idea that consumers are solely responsible for today's ecological crisis; the consumer society does not exist for its own sake, it is a capitalist consumer society that is shaped and created by capitalism interests. Major corporations,

whose decisions shape consumption, are compelled to continuously expand production and consumption within a capitalist system that prioritizes profit as the ultimate goal of commodity creation (Meier 2022).

The fossil fuel crisis, plastic pollution, and food waste represent some of the most complex challenges stemming from consumerism's impact on the environmental issues of modern society – challenges for which the theory of ecological modernization fails to provide a definitive solution. Even if these solutions are provided in future, the irreversible environmental damage is already done.

The key question that arises is whether environmental protection is possible if production and consumption remain at the same level or even increase? When all the complex elements of this issue are taken into account, it is not surprising why the theory of ecological modernization still leaves the issue of consumption in the background. The consumerism of modern society is such a complex issue, intertwined with the essential postulates of capitalist society, whose survival rests precisely on consumerism; that a change in focus on consumption in the theory of ecological modernization would inevitably lead to more radical ideas that would shake the foundations of capitalist society. And this radical approach is precisely what the theory of ecological modernism, as “green capitalist” approach, has successfully avoided from its very beginnings, remaining on the side of the mainstream social narrative, which has enabled it to have wider practical application.

Will the theory of ecological modernization have to radicalize and move away from its “green capitalist” framework? “If consumption cannot be reigned in through purely technocrat reforms – which is doubtful, considering the existence of those very phenomena depend upon (over)consumption – a more radical program might be in order” (Carolan 2004, 255).

4. CONCLUSION

The connection between ecological modernization and consumer society is very complex. On the one hand, the theory suggests that technological innovations can lead to the development of sustainable products and services, which would imply compliance with consumer demand for environmentally acceptable and socially responsible products. However, there is a justified fear that the ecological modernization theory does not sufficiently deal with the basic issues of consumerism and excessive consumption inherent in consumer societies. Although technological progress can to some extent offer some tentatively more sustainable alternatives, overall consumption patterns and lifestyles led by consumer societies can still have a significant impact on environmental degradation. The production and subsequent discarding of an increasing amount of goods or part of them (primarily packaging), as well as the energy and resources needed to maintain a consumer-oriented economy, can have a very significant environmental impact.

This perspective suggests that ecological modernization in itself may not be enough and that in order to achieve true sustainability, much deeper social changes are necessary, which will focus on consumption in addition to production, while taking into account the level of development of different countries, their natural, cultural, economic and generally social specificities.

Ecological modernization is beyond any doubt a step in the right direction, and criticisms of its eventual shortcomings do not mean that the theory as such has failed, but aim to indicate

possible ways of upgrading this most famous sociological theory on environmental issues. Taking consumption into account, as a very important determinant in matters of ecological sustainability, can certainly only have a positive impact on the further development of the ecological modernization theory and its long-term practical sustainability. However, it should also be borne in mind that the question of limiting consumption in capitalism is in a certain way an unpopular measure that is still brought up in connection with communism. Although a step in the right direction, in light of population growth and consumption growth, there is a justified fear that this step is not fast enough to catch up with the growing threats facing environmental protection.

Ecological modernization theory certainly does not lack pragmatism, because it recognized at the very beginning that in the modern, globalist world, any advocacy of a drastic reduction in production would meet with firm resistance from the economic elites, thus completely preventing practical application from the very start. This reality must be kept in mind even today; however, with the constant growth of the population on earth and the constant growth of consumption, the growing problems of waste disposal and the depletion of limited natural resources, the time will inevitably come when society will have to decide whether to give priority to economic growth or long-term survival. This decision must be accompanied by meticulous planning, a carefully managed transition period, and a fundamental shift in the paradigm of modern consumer society, as well as an equally critical transformation of the capitalist framework.

Despite its limitations, the theory of ecological modernization, alongside Beck's concept of the risk society, stands as one of the most influential social theories in the realm of environmental sociology. However, like all ground-breaking sociological theories, it must withstand the test of time—a challenge that will demand further refinement, particularly in developing strategies to address the pressing issue of overconsumption.

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(NE)USKLAĐENOST TEORIJE EKOLOŠKE MODERNIZACIJE I POTROŠAČKOG DRUŠTVA

Teorija ekološke modernizacije je pristup koji nastoji da pomiri očuvanje životne sredine sa ekonomskim razvojem i tehnološkim napretkom. Teorija sugeriše da se problemi životne sredine mogu riješiti usvajanjem čistijih tehnologija, povećanjem efikasnosti resursa i primjenom ekoloških propisa. Jedan od ključnih aspekata ekološke modernizacije je uverenje da ekonomski rast i zaštita životne sredine mogu ići ruku pod ruku. Zagovornici tvrde da kroz tehnološki napredak i razvoj ekološki prihvatljivih industrija, društva mogu postići i ekonomski prosperitet i ekološku održivost. Ono što se smatra najvećim slabostima teorije jeste nedovoljno uzimanje u obzir potrošnje i narastajućeg konzumerizma potrošačkog društva današnjice, kao i nedostatak perspektive za zemlje u razvoju koje doživljavaju značajan industrijski razvoj u posljednje dvije decenije.

Ključne reči: ekologija, životna sredina, teorija ekološke modernizacije, potrošačko društvo.