

Lesław Hostyński, *Karnawał czy post? O moralnych zagrożeniach w świecie konsumpcji [Carnival or Lent? Moral Threats in the World of Consumption]*, PWN, Warszawa 2015, pp. 300.

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PWN Publishing has recently brought out Professor Lesław Hostyński's book entitled *Carnival or Lent? Moral Threats in the World of Consumption*. This monograph is not a separate work without any relationship to his previous publications, but rather their consistent follow-up. In *Wartości użyteczne (The Utilitarian Values, Lublin 1998)*, the author identifies two groups of values in the axiological universe: utilitarian and absolute, the latter understood in a similar way to Elzenberg's perfect values that have their source in the philosophy of Plato – those "that should be realized". This work, however, focuses not so much on higher values but, as its title indicates, on the utilitarian ones. They are not homogeneous but consist of values sustaining human life (i. e. viscerogenic values) and vital psychogenic values. The conception of the latter was developed by the American psychologist Abraham Maslow in his theory of needs hierarchy. These needs are secondary in comparison to all the other physiologic needs and no sooner do they emerge than the primary needs are met. They include a wide range of needs starting from the need of security up to the need of self-fulfillment. Their appearance comes not so much from the natural conditions of the organism seeking homeostasis, but from the external society pressure which is well known and described in the philosophy as "hedone" which means "pleasure". This pressure, evolving and changing through the years, has contributed to the creation of utilitarian values. As the "pressure force" it is the main driving force of the modern world of consumers who forget what Hostyński underlines – that the choice among a variety of consumer goods is, in reality, the choice between different values.

Together with the transition from productive to consumptive capitalism in which purchasing goods has become more important than their production, utilitarian values have become the foundation of the origins of social life. Hostyński devoted his next monograph entitled *Wartości*

w świecie konsumpcji (*Values in the World of Consumption*, Lublin, 2006) to this subject. In addition to the abovementioned issues, the author argues forcibly with the supporters of axiological absolutism who refuse to apply a separate status to those values (or, in the extreme version of the absolutism, deny their very existence) and he distances himself from the claim that consumptive attitude is *a priori* morally wrong because it destroys the sensitivity to higher values.

The theme of values and their reception by the *homines comsumentes* return in the latest, third in turn, monograph by Lesław Hostyński *Karnawał czy post? O moralnych zagrożeniach w świecie konsumpcji* (*Carnival or Lent? Moral Threats in the World of Consumption*). The question stated in the title, as suggested by the author in one of the chapters, refers to the picture of a Dutch painter Pieter Bruegel (the elder) entitled *The Fight Between Carnival and Lent* (1559). As, “medieval body is constantly taken by the contradictions: lent and gluttony, carousing and abstinence, lean and fat”<sup>1</sup>, so in the modern world, with an intensity never seen before, the source of the moral tension returns between two kinds of values: the absolute and the relative, that is utilitarian, ones. The former, despite all the disputes about their content and the way of their existence, all come down to Plato’s triad of truth, good and beauty and were a clear and fundamental point of reference for the social relations of “before-consumptive times”. However, the roots and the role of the latter require separate attention. “The world of consumption – notes Hostyński – is a place where two axiological systems confront. Metaphorically speaking, it is the confrontation of the time of Lent with its domination of absolute values determining mainly the realm of morals, with the time of Carnival, with its domination of essentially relative values”<sup>2</sup>. In a world where “the menu has replaced the Decalogue” (the author borrowed this phrase from Zygmunt Bauman) it is possible to distinguish two trends: the abandonment of absolute values and their substitution by utilitarian ones and, from the point of view of morality, the “absolutizing” of the utilitarian values. In a word, the progressive “carnivalization” of everyday life practices distorts the world of absolute values of consumer society and makes it “slip” into the utilitarian values: relative, fleeting, volatile and easily dropped in favour of other values. One must admit, however, that the attitude of Hostyński is quite reserved and careful. According to him, despite the crisis of old values in the modern world, what we encounter nowadays is a reassessment of values rather than a total resignation from them and moral nihilism. The question is: what values are shared by the average *homine consumenti*?

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<sup>1</sup> L. Hostyński, *Karnawał czy post? O moralnych zagrożeniach w świecie konsumpcji*, PWN, Warszawa 2015, p. 163.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 270.

In answer to this question, I would like to take a look at the formal structure of the book. The introduction puts the reader in the subject matter and summarizes the earlier scientific achievements of the author, whereas the first chapter, conclusive for the entire book, explains Hostyński's understanding of the term "values" and systematizes all that this term denotes (it must be added, however, that value is not treated as existing independently but rather as "creation of the human mind"). The subsequent chapters deal with individual values in a world of consumption, each containing a brief summarizing of their historical origin and a diagnosis of selected present social phenomena and the moral threats they bring. In his analyses the author refers not only to his own considerations and observations but also to scholarly authors, such as philosophers and sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, Michael Sandel, and Simone de Beauvoir, psychologists Philip Zimbardo and Abraham Maslow, as well as to some examples from literature and history. Here is an example of Hostyński's approach: all other values have their foundation in the basic values building our sense of security. The need, by itself natural and instinctive, under the social manipulation of the Government or Corporation, in the minds of *hominum consumantium* becomes a warped reflection of itself, and a kind of "paravalue". One cannot talk about the responsible and commonsensical implementation of this value in panic raising of residential buildings in order to protect the inhabitants from those who are "wrong and dangerous", or in stoking the fear against terrorists or immigrants by media. Hostyński seeks the antidote to the irrational fear which propels the mechanism of consumption in coming back to absolute values which, constant and timeless as they are, could provide humanity with a sense of security and stability in the current dynamic and changing modern world.

In a similar way, Hostyński analyzes other values (together with the instrumental values accompanying them), and their presence in public life, such as love or allegiance, referring to different social, cultural and axiological categories: old age, death, power or *sacrum*. One must admit, however, that his social diagnosis are insightful and multifaceted, although sometimes a little overdrawn. We can ask whether some phenomena described by the author, such as increasing the size of penis and polyamory are as popular as the author tries to convince us. Perhaps the aim of such hyperbolization of some social trends or phenomena was simply to indicate the scale of the problem and warn against a possible future *axiological bump*. It is also a highly polemic matter, whether it really is so, as Hostyński claimed in one of the final chapters, that masculinity and femininity are not only cultural patterns based on some archetypes, but they are values themselves. Perhaps the implementation of a given cultural pattern, male or female, implies a specific preference to a value which in turn allows the patterns to gain

their defined shapes, such as an enterprising and brave man or a loving and independent woman.

Despite these doubts, the latest monograph by Professor Lesław Hostyński is a valuable book and an important voice in the debate on values. The author fully achieved his research goal which was an attempt to answer the question: what are the absolute values of consumer society and how they change nowadays. And although Hostyński does not seem to give a straight answer (stating clearly that it is not the purpose of this monograph) to the question of how to protect absolute values from the destructive influence of irresponsible consumer attitudes, a possible exit from the trap of consumerism can be suggested. One of the ways could be appreciating the role of the concept of dignity in social discourse, shaping attitudes, responsibility and care in the fight against the egocentric orientation of a typical *hominis consumentis*. Perhaps, given the direction in which an afterthought of Hostyński follows, possible solutions and remedies to the threats of consumerism will be taken into consideration in the next publication of the author.

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