

# Alternative Hedonism and the Critique of Consumption in the Philosophical Thought of Kate Soper

Zsolt Péter, Függ<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> 'Environmental Philosophy, Bioethics and Green Philosophy' Research Group, University of Pécs Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Education and Regional Development, Pécs, Hungary, Email: fuggzs@gmail.com

## Abstract

The focus of this paper is on the philosopher Kate Soper, author of at least a dozen books on feminism and continental philosophy. She has been involved in numerous environmental and peace movements in the UK and elsewhere in Europe, and her work on ecological issues is partly influenced by this. She has published numerous articles in *Radical Philosophy*, *New Left Review* and *Capitalism Nature Socialism*. This paper attempts to summarise her theory of 'alternative hedonism'.

**Keywords:** alternative hedonism, consumption, sustainability

British philosopher and author Kate Soper has made substantial contributions to the fields of philosophy, and cultural studies. Her work spans a wide range of topics, including critical theory, feminist philosophy, musical aesthetics, and contemporary cultural politics. She has written extensively about the concept of responsibility in both ethical and political contexts. In her works, she critiques the traditional liberal view of responsibility, which emphasises individual autonomy and freedom, and argues for a more nuanced understanding of the responsibility that takes into account the social and cultural forces that shape our actions.

In the 2000s, Kate Soper published several papers (Soper, 2006) on the significance of new thinking regarding pleasure and the good life in promoting sustainable consumption. Her thoughts serve as the basis for a research project inside the ESRC/AHRC Cultures of Consumption research programme.

According to Soper, sustainable development requires the emergence of new ways of thinking, which may include new concepts of pleasure and self-

actualisation. Only this can make it possible to strengthen a more ecologically sustainable and efficient use of resources, eliminate social and environmental exploitation, and curb Euro-American consumerism. This concept must be promoted primarily among the wealthy global elites. Thus, alternative hedonism would be a concept that could have an impact on the perceptions of affluent consumers, redefining self-interest, and this could lead to a transformation of emotional responses that could help solve the ecological problems of the coming decades (Soper & Lyn, 2006).

Transformation of self-interest emphasises the importance of education and cultural change in achieving this transformation. Soper argues that individuals must be educated about the social and ecological impacts of their actions and that cultural norms and values must be transformed in order to encourage more sustainable and just forms of self-interest. In essence, therefore, it is not a matter of denying the pursuit of self-interest, which is the basis of the existing consumer culture and which, at the same time, is at odds with ecological problems, but of reinterpreting and extending the concept of self-interest and reordering our needs, desires, norms, and interests in terms of the broader concept thus understood.

Therefore, anti-consumerist ethics and politics must not only focus on eliminating altruism, appealing to compassion and concern for the environment, but essentially on reconciling self-interest and consumer society with sensitivity to ecological problems. In sum, Soper argues that attitudes need to be changed based on existing structures of feelings and values. Certain variations of human desires can provide the basis for politics that works against the consumerism that has been customary up to now but is also democratic (Benke et al., 2017).

She "questions the liberating nature of the modern market economy, this time in terms of consumption. According to Soper, consumerism is responsible for the environmental crisis, the bleakness of society, and the impossibility of several lifestyles. According to the thesis of alternative hedonism, sustainable consumption is not primarily a self-absorbed responsibility for the planet but a new way of unleashing our creativity and pursuit of happiness." (Scheiring & Jávora, 2009:20)

Soper, in his book *What is nature?* (Soper, 1995), addresses the question of the cultural representations of nature and how this affects debates about environmental protection. While it is true that instrumental rationality can have devastating consequences, ecologically minded critics of nature often make the mistake of failing to clarify their conceptual context. The concept of nature is often

associated with explicitly positive feelings and thus becomes a romantic metaphor saturated with nostalgia.

It becomes problematic to distinguish between the reality of nature and its cultural representation. Meanwhile, there is an ontological difference between our ideas about nature and what we create them about. In social discourse, nature is a kind of candidate, but the ozone hole is not in language (Feldmayer, 2019).

Soper is also concerned with cultural issues because she believes that our consumer choices and related behaviour are not merely phenomena that pass through financial calculations, but "consumption is a political and cultural act embedded in power relations" (Zilahi & Szabó, 2019). The philosopher argues that a less growth-driven way of thinking about development could open up new possibilities in representations such as the relationship between past and present, tradition, and modernity. Without this, a more ecologically sensitive way of human life forms cannot emerge.

It is interesting that Soper places a strong emphasis on cultural policy and sees the arts as having a significant role to play in future changes. These tend to be less critical aspects of environmental ethics or environmental discourse in general. This is because no other area can be expected to support a change in attitudes since everything is part of consumer culture. Art and education can be the starting point for changing one's view of nature and ethical attitudes in the future.

The link between culture and consumption is already very problematic in defining basic human needs. Soper (2020) philosophically explores what is included in the basic human need, and whether it can mean more than access to food, drink, and shelter. The most difficult question is to what extent needs can be objective or socially constructed. According to Soper, the latter is very much the case, which is why the culture of consumption needs to be redefined, to which the theory of alternative hedonism can provide an answer.

The idea of alternative hedonism claims that people's attitudes will change if their ideas about the "good life" change. Currently, these ideas are dominated by tendencies that idealise American and European consumption patterns. This shift requires individuals to recognise their role in exploiting the dangers of modern society. However, he changes his habits not only because he is altruistic and able to live in abstinence but also because he finds pleasure in living differently. Switching from a car to a bicycle may not just be an external constraint because people can derive pleasure from cycling (Gulyás, 2008).

According to an article in 2020 (Soper, 2020a), the tension between capitalism's priorities and ecological obligations can no longer be ignored. The Janus-faced attitude of governments is unacceptable, asking people to save energy and live healthier lives while promoting economic policies encouraging consumption expansion.

Therefore, any individual or mass movement that increases the pressure on governments and encourages them to commit to change and transformation finally are welcome. It is changing in affluent societies that can be most effective and of most global significance, as the disproportionate consumption of the rich is linked to the deprivation of the world's poor.

Citizenship should mean more than just holding a passport and enjoying rights. It must include obligations and responsibilities (Szilágyi, 2021) to the wider community, including future generations. Alternative hedonism puts the individual at the centre, in contrast to current modes of consumption. The plans and ideas of international organisations and institutions to avoid ecological catastrophe or at least reduce its intensity will not have a more substantial impact on governments until their electorates take them seriously.

The self-realisation of the alternative hedonistic individual leads to the right person being placed in the most important decision-making positions. Changing the perception of affluent consumers can bring about a more sustainable and just world order (Soper, 2020a). So the alternative hedonistic individual is reflexive and autonomous, whose self-interested needs include collective goods. In a recent article, he pointed out that despite its many difficulties, the epidemic situation also creates a new opportunity to rethink what the 'good life' means for us (Soper, 2020b).

One potential critique of Soper's work is that it is difficult to reconcile her vision of alternative hedonism with the realities of contemporary capitalism. Many critics argue that the global economic system is built on the constant expansion of consumer culture and that it is difficult to imagine a future in which individuals can find pleasure and fulfilment outside of this system. Soper has responded to this critique by arguing that change is possible and that individuals can challenge the dominant ideology of consumption through small, everyday practices such as recycling, reducing waste, and buying sustainable products.

Another potential critique of Soper's work is that it focuses on individual actions and behaviour rather than structural factors that shape consumption patterns. Critics argue that systemic change is necessary to truly address the negative

impacts of consumer culture and that Soper's focus on individual actions may not be sufficient to bring about significant change. Soper has responded to this critique by acknowledging the importance of systemic change and the need for collective action, while also emphasizing the role of individual agency in shaping societal norms and practices.

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