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Universität Bremen

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Hellmuth Lange and Lars Meier

University of Bremen / Germany

Abstract

In industrializing countries new groups of consumers with remarkable purchasing power are emerging. Representing a "new middle class" they are seen as a carrier and promoter of a so-called "western way of life" beyond the OECD countries. They are presented as having a consumerist predator lifestyle which stands in conflict with the requirements for a sustainable future. Furthermore, they are imputed a profound lack of a sense of responsibility towards society. However, such a 'civil society spirit' is a core prerequisite for coping with the challenge of changing existing lifestyles to insure a more sustainable future.

Based upon data from a survey this paper demonstrates that these assumptions are flawed and constitute a misleading perception of the so-called new middle class and their potential role as contributor to and even promoter of a more sustainable future in industrializing countries. The situation is contradictory: on one hand they are clearly the most relevant agents of spreading non-sustainable lifestyles, predominantly confined to the OECD countries in the past. On the other hand relevant parts of them do acknowledge social responsibilities beyond the traditional ambit of their families, and they also acknowledge responsibilities to contribute to a more sustainable future. Thus, comparing the middle class of industrializing countries to those of the (post)industrializing countries, the most interesting question is not whether sustainability is explicitly an issue or not. It seems far more interesting to ask: what are the specific profiles of attitudes and everyday practices of particular groups of the "new middle class" in particular countries, and are these conducive to a more sustainable future in terms of both social and ecological responsibility?

In pursuit of this our case study focuses on HQEs in India.

1 Introduction

Agenda 21 of the United Nations (1992) named two primary missions: the defeat of unsustainable modes of industrial production and the defeat of unsustainable patterns of consumption. Both of them are core features of the Industrial Society (Bell 1973). In particular, unsustainable consumption patterns are the other side of the coin of affluence mainly in the OECD countries. With the rise of the "new middle class" in rapidly developing countries such as China, Indonesia, Brazil, and India, the environmental and social impact of their specific lifestyles becomes the focus of scrutiny. Their consumption of industrial goods, such as cars, AC, and refrigerators, is treated as the cause of a growing use of scarce resources and an increase in CO_2 emissions (cf. Myers/Kent 2003; Winters/Yusuf 2007). The negative impact of their lifestyles has been illustrated by a growing ecological footprint (cf. Flavin/Gardner 2006: 4).

Hence, its members began to epitomise the failure to meet the requirements of a more sustainable future by lacking any sense of responsibility regarding both environmental and societal needs. Accordingly, the "new middle class", for example in India, is imputed to be a congeries of "consumerist predators" marked by "complete insensitivity to any social concern" (Varma 1999; cf. Gupta 2000). In 2000 the overall number of "the new consumers" in the developing countries was estimated at more than 1 billion people: 303 million in China, 132 in India, and 75 million in Brazil (cf. Myers/Kent 2003). In terms of consuming activities, for example, the spending on consumer durables in India grew by 53% between 2003 and 2004 and passenger car sales by about 25% annually (cf. Ryan 2006). In China between 1990 and 2000 the number of cars rose from 1.6 million to 8 million (cf. Myers/Kent 2004: 27).

The customers are criticised for eroding, with their consumerist lifestyle and by their growing number, the humble progress that has been achieved toward a more sustainable future. In fact, the concern about a potential backlash in sustainability is not wrong in general. But, at the same time, a couple of severe objections need to be raised. They are variations of an overall question: how homogenous are the outcomes of globalizing lifestyles and consumption patterns?

2 Conceptual and theoretical framework

Our thesis is that the concern about an emerging "new middle class" of "predators" is characterised by a considerably simplified view. It is a view which is grounded on a plain perspective of globalization. Regarding this view three points are in question:

- How relevant are national varieties of modernisation?
- How homogeneous or heterogeneous is the "new middle class"?
- Is globalization restricted to only bad habits?

2.1 How relevant are national varieties of modernisation?

In modernisation theory it is controversial to what degree there really are different "modernities" (cf. Eisenstadt 2000)., as a consequence of historical path dependencies But it is beyond question that in spite of significant similarities between different countries there are, at the same time, coexisting "varieties of modernity" (Schmidt 2006) or "varieties of capitalism" (Streeck/Yamamura 2004). This applies also to the ways and effects of globalization. The peculiarities of national states, such as specific histories and socioeconomic structures, remain powerful forces in shaping the development of particular countries in specific ways, for example in terms of different political-administrative patterns, different welfare systems (cf. Esping-Anderson 1990), and other dimensions of regimes of regulation (cf. Jessop 1990).

Therefore, the members of the new middle class are not acting in a uniform space of a global modernity; their social activities are embedded in particular national state settings which lead to specific shapes of modernity. To bring it to a point: in spite of a growing number of common features, French modernity is different from German modernity, and Chinese modernity is different from Indian modernity, today and tomorrow too. This also applies to lifestyles. In consequence and to put it in a paradoxical way: the globalization of lifestyles should be examined within the framework of its country specifics. Acknowledging that "there is no homogeneity within civilisations" (Schmidt 2006: 88) our survey focuses on parts of the new middle class in India.

2.2 How homogeneous or heterogeneous is the "new middle class"?

A second dimension of heterogeneity characterizes the internal structure of the new middle class. It is reflected by the evident problems of finding a consensual term (cf. Favero 2005: 18). Besides "new middle class" (Säävälä 2006; Fernandes 2006) other terms such as "new

rich" (Robison/Goodman 1996), "new urban middle class" (Nijman 2006), "new consumers" (Myers/Kent 2002) or "middle class" (Favero 2005) are in use. Consequently the size of the group varies considerably depending on the use of the parameters to determine the middle class. Optimistic with regard to the future of a growing retail market, economic analyses estimate the number of the new Indian middle class, as potential consumers, at 300 million people. India is thus ranked as the worldwide number one in terms of consumer market potential and of attractiveness for global retailers (cf. A.T. Kearney 2006). Others identify a number of around 200 million middle class people or 17.5% of Indian households with incomes over $25,000 PPP (purchasing power parity) (cf. Ryan 2006). Myers and Kent (2002) recognized on an income basis of more than $2,500 PPP per person for the year 2000 a group of 132 million new consumers in India. In contrast to the numbers above, the research study of the NCAER (National Council for Applied Economic Research) see a number of 10.7 million households with an annual income between 200,000 and 1 million RS as the middle class in India (cf. NCAER 2005). Their analysis demonstrates that the middle class is far from being homogenous in socio-economic terms. Regarding India, they distinguish different consumption patterns (ownership of cars, two-wheelers, or AC-systems) and 5 income classes. A different analysis also based on income and consumption patterns leads to the following results (cf. KPMG 2005).

The classes	Number of households (in millions) 2005-06
Rich (Above INR 215,000) Own cars, PCs, luxury items	6
Consumers (INR 45,000-215,000) Own bulk of branded consumer goods, 70% of two-wheelers, refrigerators	75
Climbers (INR 22,000-45,000) Have at least one major durable (TV, mixer, sewing machine)	78
Aspirants (INR 16,000-22,000) Have bicycles, radios, fans	33
Destitute (Less than INR 46,000) Hand-to-mouth existence	17

Source: KPMG (2005), from Marketing Whitebook 2003-2004

In other words: although in the media and particularly in advertising (cf. Mazzarella 2003) the "new middle class" is commonly addressed as a homogenous social group, it is actually rich in significant internal socio-economic and – subsequently – socio-cultural divisions. As a matter of fact it is just "a small segment of urban upwardly mobile people that has provided the basis for the discursive production of the image of 'the new middle class'" (Fernandes 2000b: 89). As far as its real heterogeneity is concerned, until now, only weak empirical knowledge is accessible. What is stated by Nijman for the Indian case applies for the "new middle classes" in other developing countries as well. With regard to the empirical findings the "new middle class" is still a "mysterious class" (cf. Nijman 2006).

In any event, there can be no doubt that the Indian middle class is divided into different components in terms of income, lifestyles, and working conditions (cf. Favero 2005; Fernandes 2006; Nijman 2006; Mawdsley 2004). As it does in Western societies, the Indian middle class also differs in milieus (cf. Bourdieu 1986), races, and genders. As a consequence and depending on the lifestyle specifics of distinct milieus, their attitudes and everyday routines in general and their attitudes with respect to social and environment responsibility in particular are diverse. Hence, empirical sociological research has to decide which group shall be the focus. In our survey the focus is on HQEs working in multinational companies. This specific category of Indian society, in 2006, comprises, among others, 1.3 million professionals working within the IT-ITES industry, 930,000 of them working in its export segment (cf. NASSCOM 2006). We decided to draw on this particular group for two reasons: (1) for its purchasing power as a basic prerequisite for enabling decisions in favour or against the kind of products which are in the focus of the debate on unsustainable consumption; (2) for the intense contacts that many members of this group tend to have with the Western world, often also due to particular features of their job requirements. Why this might be important results from the following third dimension of heterogeneity.

2.3   Is globalization restricted to only "bad habits"?

The Indian HQEs working in multinational companies especially are mostly identified as a social group which has a higher than average contact to the global world. Actually, many of them have numerous contacts: there is a considerable level of temporary migration of professionals out of India, especially to West-Europe, North-America (cf. *New York Times*

2006) or Australia (cf. Lakha 2005; Voigt-Graf 2004); there is an established Indian Diaspora around the world (cf. Vertovec 2000), and many of them as a particular feature of their work settings are part of global information networks. Thus, they can be seen as being part of a global network society which comes into being by different transnational flows (cf. Castells 1996). Watching Western media products, buying Western products, communicating by e-mail or phone, travelling or migrating by plane – all of these activities are considered conducive to new identities, thus exceeding the limitations of more traditional local and national identities. In combination with their above-average purchasing power this could in fact foster a mentality which is at the centre of the discourse on "consumerist predators" and an alleged "complete insensitivity to any social concern" (Varma).

Especially with regard to consumption, prominent scholars see globalization as an eraser of cultural differences leading to a standardized global culture (cf. Baumann 2000). In this perspective consumption – of more or less identical consumer goods and, accordingly, habits – is the key driver of global cultural homogenisation (cf. Waters 1995: 139f.). This understanding is also at the heart of the term "McDonaldization" (Ritzer 1992). Following this assumption and put into sociological terms, the growing "new middle class", by disposing of the necessary purchasing power for buying "global" products, are the most relevant promoters of McDonaldization out of Europe, North America, and Australia.

In part, this is actually true. They can afford products which are both highly significant status symbols and makers of a more pleasant life. Buying cars, TVs, expensive clothes, or kitchen-appliances or visiting upmarket restaurants, shopping malls, theme parks, or cinemas means living a Western lifestyle and, thus, being somehow part of the West. This image is not limited to the realm of advertisement and the movie industry (cf. Fernandes 2000a). Moreover, in the social sciences the focus on the "new middle class" in Asia (cf. Chua 2000; Robison and Goodman 1996; Sen/Stivens 1998, for Nepal cf. Liechty 2003) is mainly on their consumption patterns and the cultural consequences of their contacts with the West (for India c.f. Lakha 1999; Säävälä 2006; Favero 2005). But even if we accept this view, two questions arise: (1) why should the new middle class spread only bad habits, in particular habits with negative impact on the sustainability balance of their countries or even of the whole world? (2) Is consumption the only corridor to transmit Western values and habits?

According to the theory of reflexive modernity, with the process of modernisation society – political decision-makers, citizen groups and individuals, too – are driven to

acknowledge the emergence of and to cope with severe unintended side effects of former decisions in both social and environmental respect (cf. Beck/Giddens/Lasch 1994). Consequently, within specific milieus developing critical positions against consumerism can be seen as a result of foregone modernization processes. As has been demonstrated in several studies in the OECD countries, besides a specific taste in choosing consumer goods and, in a more general sense, concern for the environment emerge as core features of particular lifestyles in the realm of post-materialist milieus, accompanying wealth (cf. Inglehart 1998).

Regarding the spreading of consumption patterns, individualisation has to be considered as a second feature of reflexive modernity. Individualisation is an ambiguous process: on one hand it leaves behind traditional forms of societal embeddedness and related social obligations and commitments, which is in tune with the predator hypothesis. But on the other hand individualization is also a driver of personal commitments both in social and ecological respects. Therefore, it comes into question why this should be fundamentally different for the "new middle classes" in developing countries. Why shouldn't, for example, Indian HQEs, having a good education and a good income and living a more or less non-traditional lifestyle have social and ecological concerns which are at least in parts similar to those of the members of the post-materialist milieu in countries like Germany (cf. Vester et al. 2001)? In other words, why should the global spreading of consumption patterns be restricted to the "bad habits" only while the "good habits" should keep being restricted to genuine Westerners?

Moreover, consumption is not the only way of spreading values and habits globally. In sociology, the working process especially has always been acknowledged as a powerful force for socialisation. With regard to this paper that means that working in multinational companies is another important instance of the diffusion of values and routines. The post-Fordist working culture in multinational companies focuses more on the personal responsibilities of the employees in the realm of cooperative working structures and relatively flat hierarchies. So it is in question whether related orientations and routines in this sphere could also have a supportive function as to foster the spreading of orientations regarding social and ecological responsibility in a more general sense. If this is the case, that part of the "new middle class" working in multinational companies especially would be affected by this. In order to examine this, we choose the example of Indian professionals working in multinational firms in Bangalore.

2.4   Assumptions

In India – as in other industrializing countries as well as in OECD countries – it does not make much sense to look for attitudes, values, habits, and lifestyles which place people clearly on either the "consumerist predator" side or on the side of social and ecological concern. Lifestyles are always somewhere in between (Lange 2000; 2005). Hence, it is far more interesting to get to know what the specific profiles of attitudes and everyday practices of particular groups of the new middle classes in particular countries are, and how potentially conducive to a more sustainable future in terms of both social and ecological responsibility they may be.

Working in globally engaged companies is not only a promising framework for above-average wages which provide the financial basis for resource-consuming lifestyles; due to a high level of personal experience in international cooperation it is also a framework that gives pace to adopting "post-materialist" values, attitudes, and habits including the acceptance of social and ecological responsibility[1].

3   Empirical Findings

In order to test our assumptions we gathered data on three questions:

1.   Is there evidence for the consumerist predator thesis?

2.   And if so, to what extent and in what sense do the HQEs accept responsibility with respect to the environment?

3.   And if so, to what extent and in what sense do the HQEs accept responsibility with respect to society?

We also tested the relevance of two variables: (i) age and (ii) duration of professional experience abroad. Our hypothesis is that there is a positive correlation between reservations about consumerist attitudes and habits on one hand and higher levels of ecological and social commitment (beyond the traditional ambit of the family) on the other. This assumption could be confirmed in principle, but with differences: rather clearly with

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[1] Our findings are based on a quantitative analysis of data generated by an online-questionnaire with, so far, 149 highly qualified Indian employees working in the IT and manufacturing sector in Bangalore. All of them work in an intercultural environment, especially in Indo-German cooperation, with more or less daily contact with European expatriates.

regard to social responsibility and consumerist attitudes in general, less univocal regarding ecological responsibility.

Since the data analysis has not yet been finished, we restrict ourselves to presenting preliminary results in terms of frequencies.

3.1 Consumerism

75% of our respondents classify their lifestyle "as representative of a new more open India". In other words, they widely accept the leading cultural role which is a core assumption of the term "new middle class". But what does this really mean in detail?

We asked questions relating to three items. These were the importance of visiting shopping malls and the meaning of two costly purchases: buying a new car and choosing the current place of residence.

There can be no doubt that buying "particularly attractive goods" is by far the most relevant motivation to visit shopping malls (73%)[2]. More than half of the respondents (55%) stated that they "often like to shop and take time for this, too". But are these really indicators of a consumerist lifestyle in the pejorative sense of the term – and in negative contrast to the lifestyle of an "old middle class" (Varma 2003)? There are at least a few statements which can be seen as softening or even questioning the consumerist hypothesis: for many of the Indian HQEs the fun aspect of going shopping – normally seen as a prime element of a post-modern shopping rapture – is at most a secondary motivation for visiting malls. Only 40% of them go there because "purchases in other stores are too boring". And for just 25% of them malls are a place to meet friends.

Moreover, considerable numbers of our respondents are explicitly critical about malls: 41% of them do not like to go shopping in malls because they are "too expensive", which might also be seen, at least in parts, as an indicator of the fact that in terms of purchasing power the "new middle class" is far from being homogeneous. Irrespective of the relevance of socio-economic disparities there are also considerable reservations in terms of subjective preferences: 45% of the respondents affirm the statement: "I try to finish off my purchases as fast as possible" and a considerable proportion of them (32%) are

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[2] We used a five-part scale spreading from "completely true" to "completely not true". In order to determine the most concise profiles we aggregated the answers to a three-part scale consisting of a positive option ("completely true" or "partly true"), a negative option ("not true" or "completely not true"), and an intermediate option ("moderately true"). Here and in the following we mostly refer to the aggregated positive option.

concerned about their children as paying "too much attention to consumerism". 25% bluntly assert: "I do not like to go shopping in malls since I find them exaggerated".

Thus, the HQEs like to consume, but most of them do it in a businesslike and sober way. A relevant proportion of more than 25% of the respondents is explicitly critical. Very similar proportions can be found when it comes to the reasons behind particular purchasing decisions.

Today, cars belong to the most accepted symbols of modernity and prosperity, all over the world. Unsurprisingly, some of the answers can be ranged as confirming the relevance of this aspect. But nearly all of the results can equally be interpreted as an expression of a sober and businesslike perspective mainly interested in good quality and full access to a whole spectrum of technical features available today that make motoring comfortable and pleasant. Moreover, there seems to be an internal hierarchy: nearly all of the respondents (90%) want the interior to be "well protected against the noise and the fumes from the street", a demand that is easily understandable against the background of the daily traffic jam of Bangalore. 86% of the HQEs want the car to be "well equipped", 81% want it to be spacious for bringing the family along. Against this background, it seems slightly less important that it is "reasonably priced" (74%). An even smaller part of them want the car to be fast (61%). For 59% of them it is important that "it is not an Indian make, but European, Japanese, or American" and 53% of them opt for a car that "pollutes the air very little". This leads to the classic question whether the glass is half full or half empty. There can be no doubt, nonetheless, that these results hardly fit the consumerist predator assumption.

The relevant criteria when it comes to choosing a place of residence clearly confirm these circumstances. Only 45% agree to choosing their apartment because of the "architecture and the furniture", because there are "predominantly people like me", or because it "has a lot of space for me". A number of other features which are less distinctive in social respect are equally important ("place of work is close", "reliable neighbourhood") or even more important (~55%) such as "parents live close by", "I have my peace there", "there is a lot of green", "there is a shopping centre", "a good school", and "good medical facilities" in the neighbourhood.

3.2   Environmental responsibility

Although consumption preferences and environmental concern are closely interrelated, there might be different profiles of concern. Therefore we took a closer look at the way our respondents position themselves with respect to "the environmental question". Interestingly, and in parallel to rating their lifestyle as representative of "a new more open India", 65% of them also see themselves as "part of a new more environmentally-friendly India", and 53% of them support the statement: "If all of them would live as I do, then the environment would be better". But once again: what does this really mean for our respondents? Remarkably, nearly half of the respondents (44%) reject the statement that "environmental protection is primarily a task of the state and less that of the individual". Only 37% of them are in favour of the statement. But attitudes are just one side of the coin. Is there any practical relevance? Actually, 30% of the respondents assure that they are "already supporting an environmental group", 20% have even "been involved in discussions aiming at finding solutions for a particular environmental problem" – quite a remarkable number, even in comparison with countries such as Germany, and definitely no confirmation of a "lack of interest" or solicitude.

3.3   Social responsibility

We asked for commitments to "social causes beyond the realm of my family and good friends". At first glance, the related findings are not consistent with the findings about the environmental concern. Professional success is primarily rated as a result of "my own performance" (81%) and the "support of my family" (84%) – which might be fairly true. But this personal experience goes along with a strong affirmation of the statement: "If those who are not successful put in more of an effort, they could be successful, too", which can be seen as an indicator of repudiating social responsibility to support others and assigning that to the state. However, 33% of the respondents clearly question the statement that "support is primarily a task of the state, less that of the individual". Only 38% are in favour of such a statement.

Professional success is even seen as a particular obligation to support others ("I now support more strongly"…). This is perhaps due to the specifics of the Indian welfare system: lacking strong support from the national state, the parents are the most supported group (84%) and to a clearly lesser extent "the family" (64%), whereas 71% of the respondents claim to give greater assistance now to "friends". Is this an indicator of a

historical shift from a traditional orientation towards family-bound relations to a more individualized "post-modern" orientation towards friends based upon a deliberate personal decision? In any event, a considerable proportion of our respondents do not confine themselves to supporting private persons but additionally support social groups (43%) and environmental groups (36%). A further 40% affirm that doing so is "moderately true". In other words: only a small part of them say this is "not true" or "completely not true": 18% (environmental groups) and 28% (social groups).

Another dimension that can serve as a testing ground for the egoism/social responsibility question is the field of perceived intergenerational problems. As far as their own children are concerned, only 43% of our HQEs would like them "to learn professional skills that will help them earn a lot of money" whereas 87% of them want them "to learn skills that will help them gain respect". Even more approval (95%) – the highest rate of all statements in the entire survey – was given to the statement that in the realm of professional choice they want their children to "choose themselves" and that they "enjoy what they do professionally". Hence, there is a clear orientation towards individual choice which can be seen as part of a "post-modern" orientation, but it is primarily an option of personal responsibility aiming at self-determination. In this context, gaining respect, which is a socially anchored goal, is seen as much more important than the more materialistic and, after all, consumption-related goal of earning a lot of money. However, the dynamics of the on-going cultural change is definitely a concern: 57% are afraid of conflicts with their children "since they are growing up with a different value system". But only half of that number (28%) endorse the statement that their children "now and then tend to be very egoistic". In view of the breath-taking cultural change in India and particularly in big cities such as Bangalore this is an almost surprising finding.

4   Conclusion

The Indian HQEs in Bangalore can be seen as an example of a relevant part of the "new middle class": on the basis of a high level of qualification they were able to realize a superior professional career. Working in internationally active corporations, most of them German firms, they enjoy both a prestigious job and above-average remuneration. This applies particularly in comparison with their former class mates. So, in some sense, they can be seen as being a part of the happy few who succeeded in professional terms as well as

in terms of being able to afford a costly lifestyle. Unsurprisingly, buying high level consumer goods is an integral part of it. In that sense they can be seen as a pilot group which is dedicated to both adapting and promoting what in former times was called a "Western way of life" – thus turning it into a more common lifestyle which, consequently, cannot any longer be called a "Western" one, as it reasonably could in the past.

But there is little evidence that this makes them turn into "consumerist predators" who lack a basic sense of both environmental and social responsibility. There is even a segment of between 15% to 35% which is clearly amenable to relevant elements of the ecological and the civil society discourse associated with Agenda 21 as adopted by the UNCED in Rio de Janeiro in 1992.

However, personal abdication of consumption is definitely not a prominent motto (separate from whether and how much this is – in real everyday life – a relevant motto in the "West"). Instead, the focus is more on two issues:

(a) Optimizing consumption in order to reasonably balance ecological concerns with other criteria which are seen as equally or even more relevant, which is exactly the way it is being done in the "West", too.

(b) Supporting action groups in order to contribute to solutions beyond the ambit of individual personal life. In a way, this can be seen as a more political option than drawing on environmentally-friendly personal behaviour, as it has been emphasized in the "West", particularly during the eighties and nineties.

Further research should try to ascertain whether these options can be generalized as being particularly appropriate to industrializing countries when it comes to approaching sustainability issues, as far as the dimension of personal action of citizens is concerned.

In any event, our findings provide considerable evidence that globalization of "modern" or "Western" ways of life does not apply only to consumerist attitudes and habits, but to components of "post-modern" environmental and social concern as well. Working in trans-nationally engaged corporations and becoming integrated into their more or less globalized working culture could be particularly favourable to such a process.

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