

## BOOK REVIEW:

*NUOVI ASCETI: CONSUMATORI, IMPRESE E ISTITUZIONI DI FRONTE ALLA CRISI AMBIENTALE* BY *GIORGIO OSTI*. PUBLISHED IN 2006 BY *IL MULINO, BOLOGNA*. ISBN: 8815109994 (PAPERBACK), 288 PAGES

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**I**ncreasing concerns about an impending environmental crisis caused by the way society and economy are organised are being voiced, despite several optimistic bestsellers<sup>1</sup> backed by powerful opinion leaders such as *The Economist*<sup>2</sup> preaching the opposite. Giorgio Osti is one of these concerned voices. In Osti's view, the core cause of the environmental crisis is to be traced back to structural modifications of time-space patterns affecting society. Competitive pressure and technological innovation has led to what Osti calls 'modularisation' of society, that is: increased autonomy of groups and organisations, accompanied (always with retard), by new forms of coordination. In the economy, this pattern of organisation helps firms to maintain the necessary flexibility; in the public institutions' field, modularisation permits a response to an increasing complexity of societal needs; and in society in general it accompanies an increasing trend towards individual freedom.

The continuous processes of disaggregation / reaggregation allowed by modularisation produce environmental externalities, resulting in the re-positioning of human activities within the space, and the rapid introduction of new substances into the environment. These same processes also contain uncertainty, and seemingly dis-empower social groups in the face of the crisis.

However, possessing misgivings does not mean giving up trying: quoting Martin Luther King ('Even if I knew that tomorrow the world would go to pieces, I would still plant my apple tree.'). Osti argues that the environmental crisis should be faced with awareness and determination. He identifies four responses to the environmental crisis: greater governance, greater hierarchy, greater complexity, *and simplification*.

Greater governance aims at internalising externalities through communication: by letting different groups communicate, a shared view of environmental problems can emerge and coordination pursued. Those who are concerned about power imbalance in economy and society advocate greater hierarchy to counter big players who are in control of the key economic mechanisms that have environmental impacts (in terms of research,

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<sup>1</sup> Among them, Lomborg 2003, 'The sceptical environmentalist', Cambridge University press.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, 'Economic man, cleaner planet' – Sep 27th 2001 and 'The litany and the heretic' – Jan 31st 2002.

communication, trade, and intellectual property), and want control bodies with increased legitimate power to exist at national and world levels. Greater complexity is a response to the need to face the increased production of externalities with specialised systems aimed at detecting and monitoring environmental problems and at creating and promoting environmentally safe systems, such as natural parks, eco-labels, and voluntary agreements.

In his book, Osti concentrates on the fourth response: simplification. Contrary to the first three responses, simplification comes from an actor-oriented approach. The increasing dissatisfaction with the present human condition among diverse sectors of society initiates a search for alternative styles of behaviour. New groups of actors emerge in different spheres: labour, business, public institutions, and consumption. Their common characteristic is to follow norms of behaviour that imply a lower environmental impact and in many cases imply a renunciation of material pursuits in favour of higher intellectual and spiritual goals. Osti labels these individuals 'ascetics', a category studied in sociology by Weber and Parsons.

Four chapters are dedicated to the four spheres of human activity where asceticism can be pursued. In the labour sphere, labour can counter alienation, by reintroducing routines as a way to reduce uncertainty, strengthen cooperation, and increase public virtues. In the business sphere, Osti explores the theme of the social responsibility of firms, environmental and social certification, and the entrepreneurial asceticism. In the public institution sphere, ascetic approaches can be found in 'green procurement', in programs to rationalise individual mobility in towns, and in policies to improve recycling.

However, the field where asceticism is most relevant is consumption. In fact, whereas conventional economic theories take for granted that consumers pursue the maximisation of their utility, sociological literature and non-conventional economic approaches underline the embeddedness of consumers' choices in social networks, and consumption as a key aspect of social identity.

In this case, asceticism applies to very different styles: from vegetarians to consumers of organic products, from 'new-agers' to radicals, from wealthy people looking for a high quality lifestyle to low income marginal consumers. Osti groups them into four categories: reflexive, sympathetic, critical, and marginal consumers. Reflexive consumers' behaviour responds mainly to individual needs and principles, such as health, care of the self, harmony; sympathetic consumers look for alternative lifestyles and support the building of alternative networks, especially in the food sector; critical consumers use their consumers' power as a political resource (for example, with boycotts) to hurt firms or public institutions responsible for environmental degradation; and marginal consumers are those who, put under pressure by their low incomes, devise frugal lifestyles out of necessity. All of these categories of consumers, according to Osti, contribute to stimulate a simplification of the system by way of their consumer choices. They can have a direct role on the other spheres of human activity illustrated above, as they directly affect the way business, labour and public institutions operate.

The book is stimulating, dense in theory and data, and offers an interesting challenge to 'ecological modernisation' approaches. In order to face the environmental crisis, technological solutions are welcome but are not sufficient. The keys to sustainability are in the mechanisms governing society and the economy, and the role of people is fundamental in stimulating change.

The book also raises some critical questions. For example, as the environmental crisis is by nature global, how much does this book speak to 'emergent countries' and their consumers, where the acceleration of economic growth has been accompanied by an impressive rate of environmental degradation? My impression is that if we look at these societies, our pessimism towards the environmental crisis and actors' capacity to change the present trends could grow.

And, if we remain in the western countries, what is the total sum of lifestyles - those of growing groups of young, skilled, flexible, low income people - combining ascetic practices with high impact ones, such as flying frequently and making large use of electronic gadgets? My personal conviction is that there is a continuous tension between asceticism and new consumers' goods: a reduction on one side of consumption can open the way to an increase on the other. It is for this reason that all the four responses to the environmental crisis illustrated above (greater governance, greater hierarchy, greater complexity and simplification) need to be integrated. The message of asceticism may be all the more effective if the politicians receive it.