

Consumption and Defense: Contribution to a Deep Insight of National Defense

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Aspects that have to do with every day domestic issues, such as the consumption of countless goods and services, often go unnoticed. It's not that we do not realize that they happen, but more that in the haste of the purchase and the desire for the promised enjoyment, or the normalization of operations and methods proposed by the services with which we satisfy our lives, we do not stop to think about how those services reached our lands, families, or ourselves, or even worse, what changes they produce in society over time.

A stop along the way, to become aware of the reasons and consequences for the existence of these purchases and their enjoyment, can be a good opportunity to delve into a deeper concept of national defense, to go beyond being prepared to provide a military solution to national problems. It may be necessary to provide other protection measures for those things, either tangible or symbolic, that end up in our homes.

Consumption as a Measure of What We Are

Many years ago, Marx and Engels noticed a growing phenomenon of which they could not imagine the magnitude they would end up having. What were they observing?

In principle, it is well worth starting with the bourgeoisie, without the ideological cover with which it usually appears to us, and no one better than Hobsbawn, when describing the European bourgeois world of the second half of the 19th century, describing: "... the bourgeoisie no longer lived in the bosom of a familiar economy of scarcity, or in a type of society far from the temptations of high society. Their problem was spending, instead of saving."¹ This is a clear example of the prevailing social behavior in the class benefiting from the emerging industrialism, focused especially on consumption and on which the author emphasizes when asking: "how could the triumphant bourgeois, whether or not he holds political power as a class, demonstrate his conquests but by spending? The term parvenu (new rich) automatically became synonymous with spender."² This behavior draws attention, especially because it highlights the desire of those who previously did

not feel an important part of society and, based on the possibility that industrial profits gave, understood that possession was much more than enjoyment, it was belonging—social elevation. Hence, the need induced to consumption. As the prestigious British author summarizes: “Thus, the objects were more than just useful, they were symbols of status and achievements. They had value in themselves as an expression of personality, as a program and reality of the bourgeois life and even transformers of man.”³

What Marx and Engels observed is how this phenomenon replicated throughout the world due to the desire it generated and the social consequences of those who could enjoy it and who should submit to it, and how “Spurred by the need to increasingly dispose of its products, the bourgeoisie travels the entire world. It needs to nest everywhere, establish itself everywhere, create links everywhere.”⁴

Thus, the first globalization we know of, regardless of the political interpretations that it generated, put on the table a behavioral change in the social demand for consumption; powered not by mere possession, but by the change in social status it generated, the desire to belong by having –not having just to enjoy.

Later, it will be the French Gabriel Tarde who makes the profound observation that consumption is based on aspects far removed from mere physiological necessity. He argued, in several works, that consumption results from the interaction of two psychological causes, namely: desire and beliefs. From this, his disciples, true founders of economic psychology, proposed that the individual decision to consume any good or service lies in a consumption function (which they called *causation of economic behavior*) that results in an intricate set of personal evaluations and social influences including imitation and innovation.

Gabriel Tarde offers us a much more introspective vision of consumption; it is no longer just a reaction to need, but a way of the individual expressing what he is from social interaction. In summary, a *psychological* vision of consumption.

In a contemporary context, author Roberta Sassatelli presents a critique of the limitation with which the subject of consumption has been studied, as the intimate and societal reasons motivating individuals to consume are not known. A whole universe of complexities are combined in the consumer, they range from personal taste, which has strong roots in how the consumer was raised in society, the existence of an increasing quantity of goods and services with different degrees of quality and application, and a growing flow of data that from one part of the world to another, informs consumers about what and why to consume. Thus, consumption becomes a symptom of social upheaval with respect to desires and satisfactions, from available resources and the willingness to have them.

An identity can be assumed by the daily practice of what is consumed, where the individual no longer chooses a product, but the product is chosen because it

represents what the individual wants to be. So much so that Sassatelli proposes the phenomenon of consumption to be broken in two categories, with a focus on their social aspects.

First, *eye-catching consumption*,⁵ which is what an individual does to demonstrate something to others, rather than to satisfy their desire for the merchandise in question. A clear example of the above is what we can observe when an individual acquires a certain brand of cell phone, not so much because of the benefits it has, which they may not even know, but because of being able to show that they have the financial resources to acquire.

The second category is determined by consumer actions that seek to express identity or desire to belong to a certain group, to explore an emerging identity, or to differentiate from society. This *subversive consumption*, as the author coins it, can be presented in certain ways, such as the *opposite*, which is the possession and display of items to demonstrate the fact of thinking or doing something different (for example, nowadays the use of different colored handkerchiefs to indicate what one thinks about a certain topic), the *resistance* that consists of not adhering to the socio-cultural canons (at one time, horseback riding was an extreme case of non-consumption to oppose the consumer society).⁶ An *external* form of this category seeks an alternative development parallel with what has been established, such as participation in a motorcycle gang in the 60s, or even just belonging to a gang, which implies migrating to another society, with its own rules and where consumption acquires a determining symbolic relevance. In short, a vision of consumption no longer as a daily activity of the individual, but about how social issues emerge through the individual and their attempts to belong, bond, or stand out.

Consumption becomes a simple vector upon which issues, often overlapping each other, reflect what is important in cultural societal modifications. Thus, consumption is no longer just a quantitative variable to measure economic development, it assumes the possibility of being a measure of evolution, of changes. It can be both a mask with which to disguise ideas, concepts, or ideologies, or an accurate weapon that destroys the most solid cultural foundations; a legal substance to addictively exalt our hedonism and nullify the depths of our spirituality.

The wide range of services and services is transversal to idiosyncrasies, geographic regions, ties, family formats, and management methods, amongst others. Technology fosters this ecstasy of satisfactions, joys, and exhibitionism of social roles and, sometimes, it transforms itself into a product that, promising arrival and understanding of the future, only makes extraordinarily complex the lives of those that seem to assume that role with greater commitment than that of being citizens. By now, of course, the reader will wonder what this has to do with national defense.

How to think about the Defense of the Essential

We are used to a concept of defense based on the most primitive idea of safeguarding, and the use of weapons as a power not only to settle conflicts, but to avoid them—which has initiated countless acts of war. In general, the tools on which a *concrete defense* rests are usually the subject of great discussions in society due to the moral principles of their use, the budgetary expenditures they require, and the modernizations that are needed, not only in technology, but in the institutions that govern the functioning of States. Specifically, this results in the development of a military force in response to external aggression, or of a security force in cases of internal aggression.

However, we should consider a more comprehensive vision of the social corpus, which addresses the turmoil of current and future environments that will affect it. This vision defends the very formation of citizens by their interactions, the ties that unite them, their values, and behaviors. The challenge in protecting the myriad of aspects of a society's development lies in obtaining a better concept of *complex defense*.

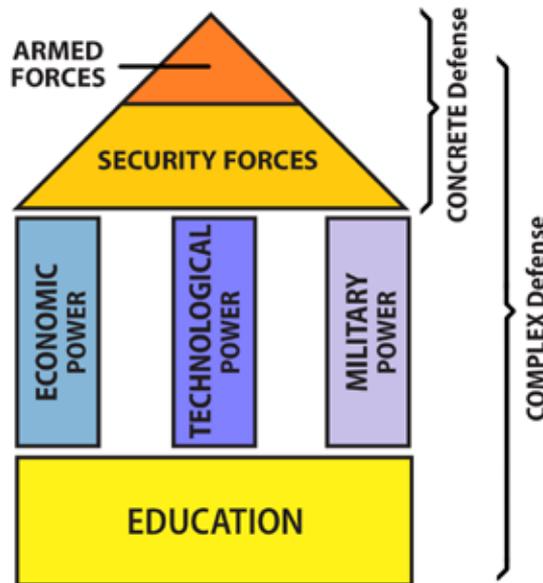


Figure. Social Corpus

Source: Author

It is easily understandable that in times of global turmoil and confusion (such as the current pandemic), the proposal for a deeper understanding of the concept of defense may turn out to be anecdotal, suitable for unscientific verbiage, a snack

for the irrepressible appetite of leaders who are very prone to take healthy concepts and discard them as bad practices.

However, precisely what has been observed in the face of the responses given to this crisis has been the naked shortcomings of state administrations that demonstrated a focus on the continuity of inefficiency and welfare of the political family. This focus has proven to be empty of strategic management, of understanding the behavior of a population that it must protect and, above all, from a painful indifference when making critical decisions, which should move us to rethink what the concept of defense really is.

Likewise, other events that have occurred in the past should have startled us to overcome bureaucratic petty, technical, red tape, for the sake of protecting society. An example is the failure of security and armed forces in the fight against illegal drugs, its practice and commercialization, which is at the root of the public health problem, a complex plot against the social fabric. However, in some countries it seems to be very practical to assign the cause of defeat squarely on the police or military forces. This is an accusation to which politicians (especially in electoral campaigns) and institutions that advocate for the defense of rights (but do not feel the obligation to secure them) adhere to, together with, in an apparent state of citizenry stupor, the same society that ignores the problem in the street and, sometimes suffers it languidly at home.

There is not, at least in my country, an entity that takes care of the exceedingly challenging task of defending the population from this and other threats, and assume the study of the threats' complexity—from individual health effects to the social impacts that immerse citizens in a life of suffering, hopelessness, and crimes. Not to mention researching, for example, the impact that health and prison systems will suffer from the direct action of youth consumption, and the multiplicity of criminal repercussions for crimes associated with consumption and commercialization.

The concept of *complex defense* assumes getting rid of the inertia of previous failures, the idealization of institutional tools that seek to promote good relations between countries and the solution of disputes within the same society. Good attempts are just that, good attempts, but they do not imply that they will lead to concrete solutions. True solutions, however, always arise from recognizing problems, having the firm decision to act and assume the cost of applying the science, technique or practice that must heal a harmful situation.

The future does not promise to be a bed of roses. On the contrary, whether a dispute is of a practical or elaborate matter, or an intangible or spiritual nature, it will travel the face of the earth with the freedom with which technology impacts

each brain, in the enjoyment that each item promises, in the behavior that each imitated behavior provokes.

The evolution of the study of consumption only shows that we are not up to the task of being able to envision the growing process of which we are a part of, much less envision its effects on the future. Consumption, with its effects and behaviors triggered by the misfortune of not owning what others have (even though we do not really know why we need them), is an omen for the power of the cultural tsunami that is coming. This, as discussed previously, has been generating for quite some time, the result of what the industrialist victory of man over the world.

The understanding and study of consumption will enable individuals, and society itself, to move away from its current nominal measurement and bring it in line with its derived benefit instead. According to Sassatelli's assessment on current consumption: "It is a complex social and cultural practice, interconnected with all the most important phenomena that have contributed to define contemporary Western societies: the spread of the market economy, progressive globalization, creation and recreation of national traditions, development of the media."⁷ In short, it is a force that transforms us, and we must decide into what.

The visions of the above authors happened right in front of us like a movie; all the while distracting society in the pursuit of an allegedly enchanted life. Poor Marx, who would say that his observation regarding the danger that encircled mankind would be distilled into a merchandising ideology which resulted in individuals not being themselves and not contributing to what we yearn to be as a society—in one instance transforming themselves into what they buy, and in another repeating either lofty utopias or parroting perceived resentments. Poor Marx's observations as a sociologist and philosopher were reduced to mere slogans on old and worn T-shirts.

Therefore, education is essential to generate the necessary tools on which to base this concept of *complex defense*. More than fundamental, foundational. Educators will need to be re-educated—the knowledge required cannot be reproduced in an assembly line process. In addition to science, an amalgamation of principles, values, and drive is necessary to transform professionals into strong change generators versus maintainers of failed practices. Of note, while specialization affords deep views on varied problems, it is faulty when it does not emerge from the same foundational base.

Without education, there will be no sustainable economic power generated over time. Neither can economic power be generated when there are no concrete decisions made or if decisions are based on administrative convenience or managerial pettiness, as assets are liable to loss—one cannot make effective use of technology if we do not understand that by itself it does not generate well-being.

Additionally, economic power can only be derived from the effective interaction between technology and the environment. The usefulness of technology does not lie in owning it, but in using it responsibly to provide concrete and palpable benefits. Societies that believe that because its kindergarten students can Google, speak some English, and make a video call with their grandparents, that they will be assured of a place among global winners, are to be pitied and will end up having a flimsy hollow defense.

Finally, not accepting that the military is more than just a combination of weapons and poorly prepared and paid personnel will exacerbate the temptation of neighboring competitors to take what they want. Being honest about the role of military power means not waiting for contingencies necessitating its use.

It is painful to observe, since the pandemic, how societies that have allowed the minimization of their armed forces have experienced a significant amount of pandemic related deaths. It has become evident, that in exceptional situations, such as this current one and those to come, the military is the only institution capable of overcoming the magnitude of the problems created when other state-owned bodies cannot cope. It may be a whim to spend excessively on military equipment, but it may also be foolish to reduce the power of a force especially prepared for these types of situations.

We are forced to think *complex defense* as an obligation to those who follow us. The future is not that far, the battlefield will not only be the terrain, the sea, or the sky, it will be each aspect of everyday life. Bullets can be lead and fighter jets can be insidious, harmful weapon systems as well as conduits against evil, war, or a virus.

A military commander will continue to be needed to resolve the issues of *concrete defense*. But it will take an educated society, sure of what it feels and wants, and committed to its own being when the turns of destiny put us in a position to exercise *complex defense*. Surely some things should not change, both depend in the preparation of personnel, their training, their tools, and their desire to give their lives for society. In the trenches, as always, victory and defeat are combined between the suffering of those who fight and the forgetting of those who have not sacrificed anything. □

Notes

1. Hobsbawn, Eric. *La Era del Capital, 1848 – 1875*. 2005. Crítica, Argentina, Cuarta edición. ISBN 987-9317-07-6. P. 245
2. Ibid.
3. Hobsbawn, Eric. *La Era del Capital, 1848 – 1875*. 2005. Crítica, Argentina, Cuarta edición. ISBN 987-9317-07-6. P. 240
4. Marx, Karl y Engels, Friedrich. *Manifiesto Comunista*. 2006. Nuestra América, Argentina, Segunda edición. ISBN 987-1158-20-3. P. 28
5. Sassatelli, Roberta. *Consumo, cultura y sociedad*. 2012. Amorrortu, Argentina. ISBN 978-950-518-666-2. P. 99
6. Sassatelli, Roberta. *Consumo, cultura y sociedad*. 2012. Amorrortu, Argentina. ISBN 978-950-518-666-2. P. 121
7. Sassatelli, Roberta. *Consumo, cultura y sociedad*. 2012. Amorrortu, Argentina. ISBN 978-950-518-666-2. P. 21



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